

NOVEL

10

WRITTEN BY
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Mishima

ILLUSTRATED BY
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TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM

THE WORLD OF OTOME GAMES
IS TOUGH FOR MOBS



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Even though I was
officially ten minutes
ahead of schedule,
I quickly said,

“Sorry to keep
you waiting.”

Angie shook her head.

“No, you’re perfectly
on time. I just came
too early.”

That night we made camp
at the edge of the forest and
gathered around the campfire
to chat. We chopped down
a tree to use as a log bench,
which we sat on as we enjoyed
our drinks in metal cups.

A curtain of darkness
hung over the sky,
studded with a vast
array of stars.



The only downside of what
was an otherwise enjoyable
experience was all the monster
snarling that trickled out
from the surrounding trees.
Really put a damper
on the mood.



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WRITTEN BY

YOMU MISHIMA

ILLUSTRATED BY

MONDA



Seven Seas Entertainment

OTOME-GE SEKAI WA MOB NI KIBISHII SEKAI DESU VOL. 10

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Epilogue

Prologue

A MAN'S FIST SLAMMED onto a desk. "No. No!" he roared. "I refuse to acknowledge a single one of them!"

The crimson light of the evening sun spilled into the classroom where I, Leon Fou Bartfort, found myself seated beside my fuming classmate. Exasperated though I was at his impassioned dismay, I made a half-hearted attempt to soothe him. "Don't get so pissy about it."

The male student in question was Finn Leta Hering, and despite his outburst only seconds earlier, he insisted, "I'm. Not. Angry." Perturbed, he turned his face away, crossed his arms over his chest, and went silent.

Hering was tall, with dark-brown skin and a handsome face. As if that wasn't enough to make him stand out, he also had piercing red eyes and long silver hair that he wore tied fast to the base of his neck. He wasn't native to Holfort; he had been born and raised in the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit. His attractive foreign looks made him popular with the girls at school—so different from the local Holfort men!—as did the sense of mystery and wonder that came with them.

However, no matter how the girls fussed and gushed, Hering paid them no mind. He cared about one and only one female student. He had even gone so far as to exploit an antiquated imperial system to travel at her side as her protector. The petite, unassuming, yet energetic girl in question was named Mia, and she was the protagonist of the otome game's third installment.

In the name of protecting Mia, Hering was studying a number of photographs spread out on the desk before him, scrutinizing the love interests who were in the running to develop a romantic relationship with her.

"The point is, not a one of them is worthy of her," Hering insisted.

Despite the fact that Hering had no romantic feelings for the protagonist, he was way, way intense when it came to finding an "acceptable match." Terrifyingly intense, in fact.

I snatched up one of the photos. I recognized the person in it as Prince Jake

Rapha Holfort, the second prince of the Holfort Kingdom and currently the most likely candidate to be named crown prince. Despite his small stature, he had an arrogant expression, which made me sigh before I placed the photo back down.

“I guess in the game, Jake is the de facto canon route. Why not go with him?” I suggested off-handedly. I was trying to push Hering to compromise and make a decision.

Hering narrowed his eyes as he studied the prince’s photograph. “The position of crown prince is currently unoccupied, and *yet* he still has not been chosen to fill the position. Besides, his thirst for power is too great. If Mia were to partner with someone who constantly picked fights, she would inevitably suffer. Unacceptable.”

So that’s a no-go. I reached over and moved the next photograph in front of Hering. “Then how about Oscar Fia Hogan?”

Oscar had red hair and a chiseled body. He was what you might call a teensy bit “daft”... Okay, no. He was a complete and utter dipstick. But he had a good heart. I thought he was a more promising candidate, but Hering dismissed him out of hand.

“He’s in the same class as Mia, but he’s an *imbecile*. Normally, it’s not in my nature to judge another person’s intelligence, but his stupidity renders him unable to protect her. He’s unworthy. And anyway, isn’t he dating your sister?”

Yeah, okay, listen: Thanks to Oscar, the Bartfort household was the happy new home of a bouncing baby *bomb*. When Oscar first joined our school, he had buddied up with my younger sister, Finley. But then, before I knew it, something had blossomed between him and my older sister, Jenna, as well. Not that he had *officially* been dating Finley, so technically, there was nothing wrong with him being in a relationship with Jenna—save for the wedge it had driven between my sisters. Those two had been thick as thieves for ages, but Oscar had changed everything. After Jenna made the mistake of gushing about how Oscar was her long-awaited partner to a brooding Finley, all hell had broken loose. Without realizing it, Finley had, at some point, begun to see Oscar as a *man*—as a potential romantic interest—but then Jenna had swooped in and stolen him right out from under her!

Ugh. Those two are supposed to be sisters. What're they doing, fighting over a guy?

Oscar had basically thrown a grenade right into my living room. I didn't exactly blame the guy, but I did grumble at him for it, since it was affecting my home life. Alas, Oscar's stupidity knew no bounds. My snarky and sarcastic digs were completely lost on the smiling fool. He managed to take everything I said as some kind of compliment.

"I guess he's out of the question, then?" I asked.

"Don't try to force a taken man on her."

"You say that, but then there's really only one person left...Erin. Who, might I remind you, is a girl now."

There had originally been one other love interest—a male student named Aaron. The reason he—or rather, she—was no longer in the running was because she had gone through a sex change and become a girl. I never could've predicted that curveball.

Hering pulled a face as he edged away from me. "If I must remind you, your people are responsible for her status."

Okay, I couldn't sit idly by while he lumped me in with the true culprits. "It wasn't *me*. Marie and Cleare did it, okay! Isn't that right, Luxion?"

I glanced over my shoulder, where a metal sphere hovered. That was my partner, Luxion. Luxion's red lens was fixed on the object floating close to Hering—Brave.

Brave was the core component of a weapon the new humans had created, called a Demonic Suit. Brave recognized Hering as his master and served him in whatever capacity required. Since it was the old humans who had created Luxion, the two robots were mortal enemies.

"Indeed," said Luxion. "However, as we have explained this countless times, I can only assume his lack of comprehension is due to his dependence on that Demonic Suit. In human terms, I believe that the vexation this causes me would best be expressed as, 'It makes me want to throw up.' I am furthermore certain these harmful effects derive from his continued use of that old human relic. My

suggestion is, therefore, to immediately cease all contact with it.”

Wonderful. Luxion just had to use backing me up as an opportunity to launch his own personal attack.

Shape-wise, Brave’s appearance resembled Luxion’s, save for the fact that his body was more fleshy and organic—which just made it way more eerie. He also had these small hands protruding from his body. He used them to motion toward Luxion as he snapped, “How dare this rotten hunk of metal disparage my partner!”

“Weren’t you listening?” Luxion asked. “I was disparaging you as well.”

“You seriously piss me off!”

While Brave fumed, Luxion stared back at him coldly. The two were bitter enemies who would, without fail, tear into one another the moment either one of them opened his mouth.

Hering ignored their exchange. He eyed me as he breathed a small sigh. “Mia’s in a very precarious position.”

“You talking about the game’s plot premise?”

“Yes. While she was born a commoner, in truth she’s the emperor’s illegitimate daughter.”

“Seems pretty common for game protagonists to be secretly special. Boy, girl, doesn’t matter—everybody dreams of being important.”

“It’s not that simple.” Hering’s face darkened. “As the imperial princess, Mia has been swept up in the succession crisis.”

“Huh? Why?”

As Hering had explained to me, beyond being the protagonist of the third game, Mia was also the illegitimate child of the sitting emperor—a fact of which she was yet unaware. As such, though she’d been raised as an ordinary citizen, she was an imperial princess of the Holy Magic Empire of Vordenoit. The problem was that His Imperial Majesty was of advanced age, and a power struggle had already broken out to determine his successor.

Hering’s expression strained with frustration as he went on, “Mia, of course,

has no interest in taking the emperor's throne. Not that her intentions hold the least relevance. Were she to gain support, many aristocrats would be troubled."

"I hate to put it like this, but wouldn't it be kinda tough for her to make a serious bid? I mean, she doesn't even know that she's part of the imperial family, right?"

"Again, irrelevant. Numerous aristocrats believe that, for their own peace of mind, any unpredictable or inconvenient factors should be eliminated. That's why love isn't part of this equation. Mia needs a partner with the strength to defeat whatever opponent challenges him. Nothing less will do."

Hering solemnly gazed at the photographs lining the table. He was supposed to be choosing eligible candidates for Mia, but unfortunately...

"None of these men fit the criteria," Hering murmured and smiled bitterly to himself. His fist slammed onto the desk once more. An ear-splitting bang echoed through the room. "As if I could let a man who lacks true resolve lay a single finger on Mia!"

"R-right..."

Strength alone wouldn't protect Mia from the precariously complicated political situation she'd found herself in. Financial power, influence, and even social status would come into play as well.

"If only Jake wasn't so taken with Erin, he would have been viable."

Jake was pretty much the main hero of the otome game's third installment. He was also the second prince of Holfort Kingdom. Alas, on top of his insatiable lust for power and status, he had one additional issue—namely Aaron, or Erin as she was now known. Marie and Cleare's little sex change operation had turned her into a girl. Ironically, her nickname, Eri, sounded pretty similar to Cleare's nickname, Cleary, when spoken aloud.

Hering's grim expression of only moments before somehow soured further. "How exactly does one even go about changing a love interest from a man to a woman?"

His confusion was only natural. I'd wondered the same thing. "I didn't exactly decide it that way. Anyway, if those three are out, we've only got one left."

The one in question had soft, inviting eyes and delicate features, but in the photograph Luxion had provided, his expression suggested a terrible personality. The discrepancy couldn't help but make me curious.

Hering picked up the photograph to study. His face went hard, indicating that he was less than fond of this option. "I don't know much about this student, but this photo suggests a distinct lack of strength."

Helpful as ever, Luxion piped up to fill in the blanks. "Regarding Ethan, he managed to push aside his older brother to claim the right to inherit his family's earldom. It seems he's not only a gifted magic caster, but a practiced swordsman as well. In fact, in terms of swordsmanship, he's counted among Holfort's greatest."

Those little tidbits brought Brad and Chris to mind. Ethan's hair was even kind of purplish in hue, which almost made him seem like...

"He looks like what you'd get if you smushed Brad and Chris into one guy."

He was one of the best swordsmen in the kingdom, skilled in the arcane arts *and* the heir to a regional territory. Seemed like an all-rounder who could do anything he put his mind to.

"You are exactly right, Master," said Luxion. "He possesses all the traits Finn named: social status, financial power, and impressive battle prowess. Were we to consider only these specifications, he would indeed be the best candidate for Mia's romantic partner. Not that he has much competition, as none of the others are even remotely viable."

In short, he wasn't merely the best option by virtue of his impressive profile. By process of elimination, he was basically the *only* option.

I glanced at Hering. "Should we try approaching him, just to check him out?"

Hering's eyes narrowed as he continued to scrutinize the man's photo. "Yes, let's. I will conduct a thorough investigation to ensure his suitability."

"You really are overprotective." I let out a small, exasperated sigh.

"When it comes to Mia, my partner's entire demeanor shifts," Brave agreed. "Makes me feel a little sorry for the girls who have fallen for him."

As handsome as he was, Hering was regularly approached by women, even though he never gave them so much as the time of day.

“Wish I had that kinda appeal,” I muttered.

Since Hering was focused on the photographs, Brave occupied himself with me. “But you’ve already secured several women, haven’t you? According to my partner, you’re in a relationship with both the protagonist and villainess of the first game. You’ve obtained the protagonist of the second game, besides. Are you doing this on purpose?” He eyed me suspiciously.

I flashed him a cryptic smile. “Do you believe in miracles? Because that’s what it is. Pure coincidence.”

Finally, in my second life, I had achieved a degree of popularity with women. I also seemed to have good timing, which was how, before I even realized what was happening, I’d landed three fiancées. Honestly, it was a bit more than I deserved.

“You’re trying to tell me it’s mere coincidence that you snagged the protagonist *and* the villainess *and* married them both? Be honest. You targeted them, didn’t you? You can tell me. Come on, I can keep a secret.”

“You’re more entertaining than I gave you credit for,” I said.

“Master,” Luxion interjected, “it is pointless to engage in any further discussion at this juncture. You may leave the issue of Ethan to these two. We should return to the student dormitory.” He made no effort to hide the fact that he’d thrust himself into my conversation with Brave.

“Yeah, good point. Guess we should be getting back, then. You coming, Hering?” I paused for a moment as I realized he was still eyeing Robson’s photo with a hardened expression. “Still got your eyes glued on that guy, huh?”

“He looks like he has the worst personality. It doesn’t sit well with me. Do you really think this man deserving of Mia?”

Hering glared at the guy as if he were a sworn enemy. This annoyed me, if only because I could already tell that the business of finding Mia a romantic partner was going to be way more difficult than I’d thought.

“Honestly, it might be faster for you to go hunt down a guy you actually approve of,” I said.

The Redgraves could trace their roots back to the Holfort royal family, and they were one of the most powerful noble houses supporting the kingdom. Naturally, given their status as a dukedom, they possessed a suitably enormous territory in the form of a floating island. The power they possessed quite possibly dwarfed that of small countries.

They maintained a sizable, stately residence in the capital proper. Due to their obligation to provide support to the kingdom when required, the family always kept one of two people in residence there: either the current duke, Vince, or his heir, Gilbert. Other aristocrats adhered to this same practice, keeping their own estates in the capital so as to provide immediate assistance in times of emergency.

In recent times, however, this practice had begun to change.

Angelica Rapha Redgrave had been summoned to the state. She stood in an office with her long, lustrous blonde hair neatly braided and pinned in a bun at the back of her head. Her red eyes were sharp and narrow, suggesting the strength of will hidden within her. Although she typically exuded a dignified air, today was an exception; she was frowning.

In spite of having returned to her family home, her stomach was in knots as she stood in front of her elder brother, Gilbert. He sat on the other side of his work desk, where he attended to paperwork as he spoke to her. His gaze never left the documents before him, while his pen raced across the page to form his signature.

“It seems you made yourself quite useful during that would-be uprising. As your older brother, I am proud.”

Gilbert was referring to a recent event, during which the Holy Kingdom of Rachel had manipulated events to incite opposition forces within Holfort to stage a coup. Fortunately, Leon’s comprehensive intervention had allowed Holfort to suppress the rebels with few casualties.

Angie pulled a face as she stared down at the floor, trying her best not to let Gilbert see. "I did nothing. All the credit belongs to Leon."

"I'm sure that's true. As his future brother-in-law, I couldn't be more proud of him as well. I never dreamed he would climb all the way to the ducal rank in a single generation. His Majesty's whims are truly troublesome." Gilbert forced a smile, but beneath it all, Angie could sense his dissatisfaction.

"Leon didn't want this either," she said.

"Not surprising, since he lacks any interest in attaining greater status."

An uninformed bystander who eavesdropped on their conversation might have thought it nothing more than idle chitchat between siblings. Inwardly, however, Angie was panicking.

They don't think Leon's taken the kingdom's side in this, do they? She feared that her family was displeased with Leon for the role he had played in stamping out the insurrection.

Of late, a significant rift had formed between the Redgraves and the royal family. It had begun when the crown prince annulled his engagement to Angie, but dissatisfaction with the royal family was mounting throughout the aristocracy. There was good reason for this, owing in part to the former Principality of Fanoss, which had been reabsorbed as a Holfortian dukedom.

During the war with the principality, Holfort had lost the royal family's ship, which had served as the kingdom's secret weapon. This legendary ship had been the driving force behind the nation's founding. With its loss, Holfort's military strength had been severely diminished. Holfort Kingdom was a feudal state; regional nobility therefore saw a sudden reduction in the royal family's power as an opening. The aristocracy wasn't about to bend the knee to an impotent royal family, least of all those nobles who commanded the greatest power. The Redgraves were no exception to this rule. They had already given up on the kingdom.

Gilbert's pen stopped moving. He set it down and glanced up at his sister, his face stern. "Fortunately, the outcome was advantageous for us. Leon managed to demonstrate that he could take control of the situation in the capital all by himself, thereby proving that, should he so wish, he could similarly take control

of the city itself.”

Indeed, while Leon had protected the capital this time around, his actions had simultaneously made clear how easily he could bring the city to heel. Gilbert was at least making no overt complaints about the way things had panned out, but he wasn’t about to let Angie off the hook.

“Nonetheless, this also proves that you lack a solid grasp on the full extent of Leon’s power. Had we known his capabilities ahead of time, we could have tipped the situation in our favor even more.”

“But I—”

Angie tried to protest, but Gilbert held up a hand to cut her off.

“No excuses,” he said. “Are you certain he trusts you?”

Gilbert’s skepticism cut deep—not because he was Angie’s older brother, but because the question made her second guess herself. Angie’s hands balled into fists at her side as she gritted her teeth. “I am...terribly sorry about this.”

Am I really good enough for Leon? she wondered, vexed to feel herself so lacking.

To add salt to the wound, Gilbert added, “You should nurture more trust in one another; you’ll be husband and wife soon enough. That aside, it seems Leon has been showing his face at the royal palace quite often of late. Rumor has it that he’s developed a fixation on Princess Erica. Would I be correct in assuming this is no more than idle gossip?”

It was true that Leon frequented the royal palace to meet with the Holfortian princess, Erica Rapha Holfort. This fact had Gilbert staring coldly at Angie. He hoped his intentional curtness would motivate her to act.

“He is interested in not only the queen but her daughter as well. He does seem fond of the flowers that grow on the highest of cliffs. The true issue at hand is that a man of his current rank could, if he so desired, reach out and pluck them.”

“Leon isn’t—” Angie started.

“Angie, I do not honestly believe that if you asked at this time, you could

extract his true feelings. Do not forget your role in this family. Your duty is to secure Leon's allegiance to us."

Now that the Redgraves had chosen to oppose the kingdom in its present state, they intended to use Angie to win Leon's allegiance, thereby acquiring the country's greatest power for themselves.

Angie couldn't stand it. Though she kept her eyes on the floor, she made her position clear: "I am opposed to involving Leon in any further conflicts."

Gilbert looked taken aback by her comment, as though he hadn't anticipated any show of resistance. "Do you truly believe that Holfort can hope to remain a major world power at this rate? Whether you like it or not, he *will* have to fight. It is an aristocrat's fate to shed blood."

Gilbert firmly believed it was only natural for the nobility to go to battle in times of war. He could only regard Angie with disbelief.

"Leon is—" Angie's strident start hitched, her throat going dry. "He's too kind for battle." Her thoughts had gone to Leon, to his mental fatigue in the wake of all these conflicts.

Gilbert expelled a muted sigh. "It's true. The man is soft. But he's the kingdom's strongest knight, and his infamy has spread across borders. Our house needs his support if it hopes to continue."

Leon's ties to the Redgraves were strong by way of his marriage to Angie. They therefore thought nothing of pulling him into their own power struggle.

So neither my brother nor my father view Leon as anything more than a tool for battle? Angie thought. But all Leon wants...is to live a quiet, peaceful life in the countryside.

Chapter 1:

The First Princess

THE ACADEMY was so quiet on weekends and holidays that it made for a great place to kick back and relax. The students at the academy, being quite young, ordinarily used this precious free time to invite their friends on outings to the capital. A few of them took these opportunities to go on dates.

Having only known academy life when it was a literal hell on earth, I couldn't help but envy my underclassmen. A few of them were awful, sure, but for the most part, they all seemed to enjoy healthy love lives.

I yawned and stretched as I strolled down one of the silent corridors, Marie keeping pace beside me. Although she had been my sister in our previous life, she'd started her time in this world as a being of pure chaos; her actions had driven Holfort to the brink of destruction. Her full name nowadays was Marie Fou Lafan, though many knew her as "the fake Saint."

Marie often skittered along beside me like this, her legs being significantly shorter than mine. This time she was hefting bags full of gifts she'd bought while in the capital. Her lips curled up at their corners, indicating her good mood.

"I can't wait for my next tea party with Erica. Honestly, I'd like to have one every single day, but it'd cause too much of a fuss, so we can only meet on weekends."

The fake Saint spending time with the country's first princess opened a whole can of worms. In truth, Erica was Marie's daughter from her previous life—my niece, in other words. This had made for an emotional reunion for Marie, as she'd been able to see her daughter again after their reincarnations. Naturally, she looked forward to the weekends, when she could attend Erica's tea parties and catch up. I could tell how much it meant to her. I mean, she'd come all the way to my room to wake me up and drag me into the capital to buy sweets for the occasion.

“You *do* realize that the guys are spreading all kinds of rumors because you come to my room every morning on the weekends, right? Why don’t you show a little consideration for the trouble you’re causing me?”

“I don’t have a choice!” Marie argued, flailing her arms. “I can’t meet with Erica unless you’re with me. *You’re* the duke here. And anyway, the only reason I make you come with me to buy stuff is because you *insist* on hosting.”

I didn’t find these weekend tea parties for Erica particularly burdensome, not in the least. I was interested in chatting with my niece, for one thing. But more than that, holding tea parties was my passion. No. It was my very reason for living. So if I had to sit in on them anyway, I wanted to be the host.

“That’s a given. We could hardly ask Erica to do it. She may have been my niece in my last life, but in this one, she’s a princess.”

Holfort Kingdom was one of the most preeminent countries in the world, and as its princess, Erica was bound by certain expectations.

“Uh-huh,” Marie shot back. “Let’s be honest, you just wanna indulge your little hobby.”

“Obviously, that’s part of it. I won’t lie. But I would genuinely feel bad making Erica go to the trouble. She’s my niece.”

“Uh, and I’m your sister, remember?”

“Sorry, but on my list of priorities, she’s way above you.”

“What’s with the discrimination, huh?!”

I shrugged. “Kind of a given, what with your behavior. I could say the same to you. What’s with dragging me out of bed on the weekends to go shopping? I’m supposed to be your older brother, right? You haven’t changed a bit.”

That was an understatement. Marie had done the same thing in our last life—ordered me around like a servant on the weekends, then begged for cash whenever she needed it.

As Luxion hovered over my right shoulder, listening to the exchange, he turned his gaze toward Marie. “If my master’s claims are true, Marie, then it seems you haven’t matured a whit since your reincarnation. While physical

growth seems beyond your underdeveloped body's capabilities, I believe it fully possible for you to improve your mental capacity. Have you considered adopting more adult behaviors?"

Luxion's scathing critique left Marie gaping in disbelief. She didn't remain speechless for long, however. Blood rushed to her face as she erupted in anger.

"What do you mean by that?! Who says my body won't develop further?! Just you wait and see—I'll blossom into a perfectly sensual adult woman!"

"That was not an opinion. The assessment derives from hard data."

"What data, huh? And what was that about me not behaving like an adult?! Hate to break it to you, but I lived a lot longer than my brother did. I'll have you know that deep down, I'm still the same upstanding, experienced adult woman I was in my previous life." Marie puffed out her completely flat chest, an ironic ode to her self-avowed maturity.

"Huh, funny how a certain someone who claims to be a totally mature adult is the same someone who deceived five young men and landed herself in a world of hurt."

"That's all your fault and you know it!" Marie screeched at me, her voice echoing down the empty corridor.

"Only because you got ahead of yourself."

"Fine, I did. I'll admit it! But how does that excuse you beating the crap out of five guys in a duel? Let's be honest—you were just jealous of Julius and the others for their good looks, so you wanted to hurt them to make yourself feel better!"

Marie wasn't my sister for nothing. She knew me all too well.

"Yep, you got it. So what?" I shot back.

Marie balled her fists and gritted her teeth.

Yup. I was right. She really hadn't matured at all. In fact, thanks to that scrawny body of hers, she probably felt even younger than she had in our previous life. I didn't sense any of the adult composure you'd expect to find in someone who had accumulated as much experience as she claimed.

Luxion moved his eye from side to side as if shaking his head. “Master, need I remind you that you require some mental maturation of your own?”

Pretty sure we’ve had this same exchange before. Unlike Marie, however, I wasn’t particularly set on being an adult, and I let Luxion know it. “I’m a pure young boy at heart. I’d never throw that way.”

“I suppose that, if anything, your ability to make excuses for yourself seems to have improved.”

“The proof’s in the pudding—adults are great at making excuses for themselves.”

“I see that the status of your maturity is contingent on convenience.”

I grinned at him. “Adapting to suit your situation is an important skill.”

Marie looked on as we continued this meaningless back-and-forth. She cradled her shopping bags in her arms and puckered her lips in a pout. “You really are two peas in a pod. Especially with how wonderfully you express yourselves, snark and all.”

Neither of us was pleased to be lumped in with the other.

“Me and him?” I scoffed. “You gotta be crazy. I’m way kinder than that jerk.”

“You believe my master to be similar to myself? It seems you require a thorough eye examination, to say nothing of a brain scan. Shall I have them performed for you?”

Marie sighed heavily. “Whatever,” she snapped. “Forget it.”

Just a couple of years ago, the school’s tea rooms had seen daily use as male students invited female students to their parties, but that trend had largely fallen by the wayside. At present, usage had drastically decreased. The school had consequently made the decision to reduce the number of rooms allocated to the practice. As a tea connoisseur, I thought this a bit tragic, but I also enjoyed hosting parties in the newfound quiet. It had been far noisier during my first year at the academy.

While I was busy selecting the appropriate chairs to match the tea I was

serving, Marie and Erica had found seats and were happily chatting away. Marie resembled an excited child babbling away, while Erica was more like the parent who found such rambling endearing.

“No way! That shop went under?!”

“Yeah. The owner said they were retiring.”

The topic of conversation in which they were so invested was our previous life. It was the one thing Marie and Erica had in common, so I couldn't insert myself in the conversation. I still found it enjoyable to just listen in.

I was probably smiling without realizing it because Luxion commented, “Your mental state seems to have stabilized. I believe these weekend tea parties have become essential to your well-being.”

“Even though I'm at the center of all those rumors now? People are saying I'm pursuing both Erica and Marie.”

The frequency of our tea parties had kicked the rumor mill into high gear. I was a touch concerned, but Luxion didn't seem the least bit troubled.

“Your reputation among the student body is of no interest to me,” he said.

“It is to me though, you know?”

“It is an issue of priorities. Rather than wasting your energy on the opinions of the rabble, you should focus on yourself.”

“Did you seriously just call the student body the ‘rabble’?”

Although Luxion was referring to my peers with language that was at best discourteous, this was an improvement on his earlier, more venomous vocabulary. In the past, he would have said something along the lines of, “These new humans with their ability to manipulate magic—perhaps they should all hurry up and die.” Ah, such fine memories. The nostalgia of it all took me right back.

“To the point, you have other matters with which to concern yourself. You haven't the luxury to waste time fussing over the musings of riffraff.”

“Yeah, yeah, I hear you.”

When I had the tea ready and headed toward the table, I was greeted with the sight of Marie gesturing wildly as she spoke to Erica. Erica smiled as she quietly listened, responding with the occasional nod. Erica had told us that she lived past the age of sixty in her previous life, so she was probably pretty mature on the inside. At the very least, she seemed awfully down-to-earth for someone so young. It made Marie look like she was the kid rather than the other way around.

“I made tea that will perfectly complement the snacks we chose—hold up, how many did you guys eat already?!” When I glanced at the table, over half of the sweets were gone.

Marie promptly averted her eyes. As if I needed any further proof that she was the main culprit.

“You’re a real piglet, you know that?” I said.

“Aw, I can’t help it,” Marie responded, her voice sickeningly sweet.

I sighed. “Could you try to act your age? Heck, even a year or two older? You’re too old to be babied all the time.”

“*Most* men love getting the chance to dote on a woman, y’know.”

“You sure did grow into a twisted excuse for an adult. How about learning a bit from Erica’s example, huh?”

Marie glowered. “Pardon me?! I raised her, remember?!”

“Guess you provided her with a good example for how *not* to behave. I’m just glad she’s nothing like you.”

“Now you’re really pissing me off, you big dummy!”

While we launched our salvos of withering retorts, Erica sat by us, frowning. It didn’t take long for her to interject in hopes of putting an end to our verbal free-for-all.

“Let’s all just calm down,” she said. “It would be such a shame if we let the tea get cold.”

Marie and I huffed and looked away from each other as we sipped our tea. Erica glanced between us, troubled. I was braced for her to sigh in exasperation,

but instead, she lapsed into giggles.



What was so funny about this? I just didn't get it. "Why are you laughing?"

Erica immediately straightened and looked directly at me. Her smile was blindingly bright. "I just find it so amusing when I see how much fun you have when you bicker. The way you are with each other is just like my grandparents always said it was."

"Grandparents?" I asked before the realization dawned on me. "Oh, Mom and Dad?"

Erica nodded. "They always talked about you. They often said that, if you were alive, you and Mother would likely still fuss at each other, even as adults."

What kinda stuff were they telling her?

"Can't believe they'd say things like that. You think they'd have told you how, unlike your mom, *I* was a super kind person. That kind of thing. I mean, isn't that normally what you do when you talk about the dead? Try to build them up?"

"I am afraid I must sympathize with your former parents," Luxion said. "Bearing a child like you would surely have been an immense hardship."

"Hey, don't act like I was some unruly demon child. Marie was the one giving them headaches, not me."

Everyone's eyes turned to Marie, who was guzzling tea to wash down all the sweets she'd eaten. As soon as she finished, she made her displeasure known. "I was a perfectly good child most of the time. *You* were the one who gave them hell. Sure, you'd act all well behaved on the day-to-day, but sometimes you'd be an engine of total chaos. Remember?"

"Please, I was an angel compared to you."

"Not ever! Not even a little!"

It seemed we were at an impasse when it came to memories of our shared past. But I knew my version was the correct one. Marie was definitely misremembering things. Nonetheless, I kept any further comments to myself and enjoyed another sip of tea.

"That aside," I said, "how'd the two of them go?"

My question was admittedly vague, but Erica picked up on what I was referring to: my parents' passing.

She smiled sadly, lowering her gaze. "I was with them when they passed. They said they were going on to the afterlife to scold 'those two numbskulls,' as they put it."

Those two numbskulls, huh...? They'd doubtless meant Marie and me. We'd done the one thing no child should ever do to their parents—died before them. But it's not like I willingly jumped off the mortal coil or anything. So what'd they mean by going to scold us, huh?

If they had any parting words for us, I would've hoped they'd promise to see us again on the other side or something. On the other hand, nitpicking was more their style.

"Awful mean of them, saying they want to tell us off. Especially as the only one they should've been ticked off at was Marie." I chuckled.

Marie wrinkled her nose and frowned at me. "Why me? If they were going to be mad at anyone, it would obviously be you. Staying up all night playing a video game, only to die by falling down some stairs... Pretty pathetic way to go, don't you think?"

"You were the one who forced that game on me!" I snapped, jabbing a finger in her direction.

Marie snorted. "It's your fault for not taking better care of yourself."

"Why, you little..."

I wanted to go on, but, well, she had a point. Even I realized it had been a poor choice to pull that many all-nighters in a row. And since I had no leg to stand on, I just quietly sipped my tea, gazing up at the ceiling all the while.

After a long pause, I finally said, "Those are some cruel parents we've got, saying they're gonna come give us an earful instead of, you know, saying they'll see us soon or whatever."

Though if they somehow managed to reincarnate into this world too, I'd probably die laughing.

“I wouldn’t mind if they were angry, not even if they yelled at us,” Marie said, casting her eyes down. “I just wish I could see them again.”

We’d both horribly wronged our parents, on top of all the trouble we’d left for Erica.

“Thank you for being there for them,” I said to her. “I was worried, since Marie and I failed them. But hearing you were there brings me great relief.”

It erased a major lingering concern that had hung over me. My heart felt much lighter for it.

“You were genuinely concerned?” Luxion asked, as if he could hardly believe it. “I was certain you had all but forgotten about your parents.”

“I *am* human, y’know? Of course I wanted to know what happened to my parents after I died. I’m perfectly conscious of the burden I put on them. It was even more apparent when Marie suddenly turned up and I found out she’d died before them too.”

It was hard to believe she and I had screwed up so bad. That was why I was so grateful for Erica.

“Thank you, seriously,” I said to her. “I swear I’ll pay you back somehow. If you’re ever in any kind of trouble, just say the word and I’ll be there for you.”

Erica smiled awkwardly. “You really don’t need to worry about it. They were my grandparents. They raised me with such kindness, so there’s no need for this talk of ‘repayment,’ Uncle.”

Flustered and unsure of how to respond, I scratched my head in silence. I was touched by what a fine woman my niece had grown to be.

Luxion muttered, “Master, it is a true trial to believe that you were biologically related to Erica in your previous life.”

Marie proudly puffed up her (need I remind you: nonexistent) chest. “She’s amazing, right? My pride and joy.”

“Oh?” Luxion asked. “I thought your parents raised her. That was how it sounded to me.”

“W-well, yeah, but still.”

“Which, if I am not mistaken, would mean all the credit goes to them.”

“Yeah, okay! Maybe all the credit does belong to them, but I’m allowed to be at least a little proud, aren’t I? She *is* my daughter!”

“Alas, she is currently someone else’s child. How unfortunate for you.”

“Do you have some kind of grudge against me or something?!” Marie snapped.

I snickered as I watched Luxion pick on her. But at the edge of my vision, I caught a glimpse of Erica smiling forlornly.

When Angie returned to her room in the girls’ dormitory after her trip to the Redgrave estate, Livia went right to her. Angie spotted the blotch of ink staining Livia’s right pinky and realized she had been studying. “Sorry,” she said, smiling weakly. “It seems I interrupted you.”

Livia grinned at her. “You’re never interrupting. This is your room, after all. Welcome back, Angie.”

“Thanks.”

At least Livia’s smile brought Angie some comfort. But it didn’t last long, as Livia’s expression soon clouded. She could likely guess the nature of the conversation at the Redgrave estate given Angie’s downcast look. Likewise, Livia could see that it hadn’t gone in Angie’s favor, though that didn’t stop her from asking.

“Well, how did it go?”

Angie’s forced smile disappeared as she honestly admitted, “My brother reprimanded me. Implied I wasn’t living up to expectations.”

“My goodness...”

“It seems my father and brother don’t care for the attention Leon has focused on Princess Erica.”

Livia’s expression hardened at the mention of the princess. She and Angie were well aware that Leon was hosting tea parties for the princess every week.

They also knew that there were no romantic feelings at play, but the optics were less than ideal. The gossip-hungry students were already murmuring that Leon intended to abandon Angie for the princess. That had to be frustrating for Livia as well.

“I’ll go have a word with Mr. Leon.”

“Livia?” Angie said in surprise.

“These weekly tea parties with Her Highness are quite odd. Why is he continuing to hold them with things the way they are?” Livia’s anger was palpable.

“It’s fine,” Angie insisted. “Let him do as he likes.”

“But—”

“He likely has his own reasons for it, right? Besides, I’ve spoken with him about them several times, and all he did was brush me off.” Angie smiled bitterly.

Livia lowered her gaze. “How can I keep quiet when you’re suffering like this?” She understood that Angie was doing what she could to protect Leon from Redgrave manipulation. It was debatable whether Leon even realized that she was his shield. Most infuriating of all for Livia was that the entire country had begun to revolve around Leon, yet he remained utterly oblivious.

“You really are a kind person,” Angie said, wrapping her arms around Livia. The girls pressed their foreheads together, and Livia similarly slid her arms around Angie’s waist.

“Isn’t this difficult for you?” Livia asked.

“I guess so, maybe,” Angie said, her voice filled with sadness. “At this rate, I may be disowned. If that happens, I’ll be an ordinary girl like any other. What value I possessed will vanish. When that happens...I’ll lose Leon.”

Yes, it was thanks to Angie that Leon had climbed all the way to the rank of duke, but now it was his own battle prowess that was garnering him such attention and respect. At present, he was perfectly qualified to hold his title even without his connections to Angie. If she left him, nothing of his life would

change.

Angie squeezed her arms around Livia and her breath hitched. “Livia, am I going to be abandoned again?”

“No, of course not. I would never allow that!”

“But the way things are going...I really am going to lose everything.”

If Angie were driven out of her own house, all of the influence she enjoyed would go with it. She was convinced that if this were to come to pass, she would be utterly worthless.

“I hate this,” she whispered. “I don’t want to be thrown away, not again.”

Angie’s mind had returned to the day Julius annulled their engagement. She clung to Livia, weeping like a child.

In one of the rooms of the palace, a married couple was having a heated argument. Not just any married couple—the king, Roland Rapha Holfort, and the queen, Mylene Rapha Holfort. All around them, furnishings lay toppled over and scattered about, leaving a complete mess. Their vicious bickering had grown tempestuous.

“Enough of your foolishness!” Mylene shrieked at her husband. “Have I not explained to you *numerous* times that this is the best course?!”

Roland wouldn’t hear a word of it. “How is this the ‘best course’?! We already agreed to engage Erica to one of Marquess Frazer’s sons! You insisted upon it yourself! And now you’re going to annul that agreement and marry her off to that twisted brat? How could I possibly sit by while you conspire to ship our darling Erica off to that rotten, no-good scumbag?!” Consumed by fury, Roland lost all sense of reason and slammed his foot into one of the tables, only to bang his shin in the process. He doubled over, howling. “Yooooowch!”

Mylene stared coldly down at her husband. “Then tell me, other than marrying Erica to Le—ahem, Duke Bartfort—how else do you imagine we’ll keep the kingdom afloat?”

“You know full well that if I could come up with something, we wouldn’t be

having this argument!”

“Then if you have no better suggestions, do hold your tongue.”

Their dispute had been sparked by Mylene stating that she would be marrying Erica off to Leon. Originally, Erica had been promised to a son of Marquess Frazer, whose territory bordered the Holy Kingdom of Rachel.

Mylene’s home country, the United Kingdom of Lepart, was deeply involved with all this. Like Holfort, they also neighbored Rachel. War between Lepart and Rachel continued to this day, and when Lepart forged an alliance with Holfort, they had Mylene to seal the deal. In order to save her homeland, Mylene had offered her own daughter to Marquess Frazer in hopes of further strengthening his house’s willingness to act when required.

That was the plan, at least, until Leon, who had, largely by his own merit, climbed all the way to ducal rank. On top of that, he’d cleaned up the kingdom’s latest crisis in record time. Mylene no longer required House Frazer to save her homeland; now she wished to curry favor with someone else.

The Frazers would be utterly humiliated if the royal family were to annul the engagement that the royals had requested in the first place. However, even though she was fully aware of the repercussions, Mylene wanted Leon’s power. Roland, meanwhile, vehemently opposed this proposition.

“I can barely stand the thought of my adorable Erica getting married at all, but to that brat of all people? I’d take a Frazer whelp over him any day!”

“Do you intend to see this realm destroyed over your petty grudge?”

Mylene’s position was perfectly well reasoned, which was why Roland knew he had no grounds to argue against it—other than rehashing his own distaste for the union. “And I’m telling you, she’ll only suffer if she gets with that jerk!”

“Such is the duty of one born to the royal family.”

“What are you, some kind of demon?! This is your daughter we’re talking about!”

“It’s *because* she’s my daughter that I pray so fervently for her happiness, regardless of who she marries. That the man happens to be Duke Bartfort is

irrelevant.” Mylene’s expression remained curt, if not unreadable. But for a split second, her mask gave way, revealing the bitterness beneath.

Roland caught the brief crack in her facade and latched on. “Why don’t you just marry him yourself, then?”

“Don’t be absurd. At any rate, I’ll present this engagement proposal forward. I cannot allow the Redgraves to take his power for themselves.”

As far as Mylene was concerned, House Redgrave were now the crown’s enemies, and Roland agreed on that front. However...

“Angelica won’t sit quietly if you try to marry Erica to that brat. If you go through with this, this will be the second time the royal family spits on her feelings.”

Hearing that likely made Mylene’s heart ache, as the queen had known Angie from her girlhood. Mylene lowered her gaze for a moment, face pinched with sorrow, but when she lifted her chin, all trace of emotion had vanished. “The fate of this country far outweighs anyone’s feelings.”

“Liar. You hesitated just now, didn’t you? You positively doted on that girl.”

There was a brief pause before Mylene replied, “Were that to be true, it would not change my decision.”

Deeming any further discourse a waste of time, Mylene turned her back on Roland and slipped out the door.

Roland watched, sprawled on the floor, and sighed heavily. “The brat’s still wet behind the ears, and yet he somehow manages to bewitch women. He really is the scum of the earth.”

A hypocritical statement, given Roland’s own infidelity, but he wasn’t about to reflect on his own mistakes.

His expression turned solemn. “If Mylene’s proposal goes through, it will no doubt be the best thing that’s happened to this kingdom in an age. The aristocrats will immediately come brownnosing, I’m sure. But I can’t abide the thought of my previous Erica marrying that piece of crap.”

When Roland made the call to disinherit Julius, he had accepted it as the

natural consequence of Julius's own poor choices. Erica was a completely different story. He loved his daughter dearly.

“Aaaah!” Roland shrieked as he thrashed about on the floor again. “I can’t stand the thought of my baby getting married!”

Chapter 2:

Date

“YOU’RE DESPICABLE.”

“You are *too* cruel, Mr. Leon.”

It was a weekend morning when I strolled into the main school building only to find myself facing 1) Noelle Zel Lespinasse, standing with her arms crossed firmly over her chest, and 2) Livia, staring down at her feet, voice shaking with repressed anger and disapproval.

Noelle had a side ponytail of blonde hair that gradually turned pink at the tips. She dramatically flipped it over her shoulder as she stomped over to me. Her finger jabbed into my chest. “How come you go to see the princess every week, huh?”

It seemed those weekly tea parties were catching up to me. I was hardly doing anything wrong, but it was impossible to explain the truth. How could I tell them that Marie and Erica were my family from a previous life? I would have to start by telling them all about my reincarnation, not to mention my past memories.

But even if I did say, “Hey, guys! This whole world is actually based on an otome game!” I knew better than to think they’d believe me. In fact, if I were in Noelle and Livia’s shoes, I would assume the whole nonsense about another world and reincarnation was a distraction from something even more suspicious. They’d think I’d cooked up a desperate lie to cover my ass. That was why I couldn’t come clean... On the other hand, I didn’t want to lie to them either.

Fortunately, I’d had a feeling this would happen.

“Well, you see, Marie and Princess Erica have grown pretty close,” I explained. “But it’s hard for them to meet up and talk unless they use me as the intermediary.”

“Oh, I guess you *have* been going with Rie, huh,” said Noelle. “Although she hasn’t said a thing about this to me.”

Noelle and Marie were buds; they had really, truly bonded while we were studying abroad. I found it incredibly bighearted of Noelle to stay friends with Marie in spite of Marie’s whole Saint charade.

Also, while this reasoning seemed to satisfy Noelle, the same couldn’t be said for Livia. She leaned into my personal bubble next.

“Even if that *is* the case, please explain yourself to Angie. She’s having a difficult enough time as it is. You know that, surely?”

I had heard that Angie’s family was needling her, but I had a hard time understanding why. “I told her she really doesn’t need to bicker with her folks over me.”

“That isn’t the problem! Mr. Leon, why won’t you open your eyes and see the truth? That isn’t what Angie wants from you.”

It seemed like Livia was criticizing me for being clueless, but it wasn’t exactly out of character for me to miss something important. “Guess I’m just slow on the uptake,” I said, pouting.

Livia suddenly grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and pressed her face terrifyingly close. “This isn’t a game, Mr. Leon.”

Her expression was entirely blank. Her eyes had fallen dark, void of all light. A chill shot down my spine.

“Right!” I squeaked. “Silly me, joking around at times like this! I will go talk to Angie right away!”



“No. That’s not what you’re planning, is it? You’ll ask her out on a date this weekend.”

“A *date*?!”

“But of course. If you can spend so much free time with the princess and Marie, surely you can take just one day to spend with Angie. You wouldn’t tell me that’s beyond your powers, would you?”

“N-no! Of course not! Ah ha ha ha... But, I mean, I already spend most of my time with you guys anyway.”

Other than the weekends, I hung around Livia and the other girls more than anyone—far more than the bits of time I squeezed in with Marie and Erica.

“Mr. Leon, you need to take her on a *date*. I mean it. *Please* take Angie out. Just the two of you.”

Arguing with Livia when she was like this was like arguing with a brick wall. “Yes, ma’am,” I said, resigning myself.

“No taking anyone else either. Although, while I shouldn’t allow any exceptions, you can take Lux as well.”

“R-really?” I wasn’t sure why Livia approved of Luxion tagging along, especially as her expression was impenetrably dark. Was something else worrying her?

“Yes. I think it would be best for him to remain with you.”

“You think so?”

“Yes. So please, take Angie out next weekend. On a date. You *will* do as I ask, won’t you, Mr. Leon?” Livia dropped the menacing expression in favor of a broad smile. There was something intimidating about it, though—like an unspoken warning that brooked no argument.

“Yes, of course!”

All right, so Livia wasn’t going to let me get away with merely having a heart to heart with Angie. I was going to have to make this special.

Having watched all of this play out, Noelle muttered under her breath, “Liv

sure is terrifying.”

“What’s the perfect date?”

It was lunch break, and I had assembled my minions—that is, the love interests of the first game—in an empty classroom. I had somehow landed the unenviable role of looking after this band of boneheads, and I figured that they actually had a use for once. Their insights would help me come up with a date worthy of Angie.

Each of the five morons exchanged looks with one another before—for reasons beyond my comprehension—scowling at me.

“What? You got some kinda problem?” I asked.

“Of course we do!” Julius snapped. “Every weekend, you run off with Marie in the morning and spend all day indulging in one of your tea parties. We’re *jealous!*”

Okay, so the former crown prince was going to be of no use whatsoever. “Who cares about that? Now hurry up and think of a date. You guys have a ridiculous amount of relationship experience, right? Put it to use.”

Greg folded his arms, tensing his muscles so they bulged unnecessarily beneath the thin fabric of his uniform. “Well, we’re certainly more prudent than you, at least.”

“What’re you talking about? You guys are popular with the ladies, aren’t you? And in our first year, you guys always acted like you had no shortage of interested girls.”

“The only person I’ve ever properly dated is Marie!” Greg snapped.

I sneered at this open admission of inexperience; most guys would be embarrassed to confess such a misstep, but Greg stated it proudly.

“Yeah? Sorry for asking, then.” I paused as something occurred to me. “Huh? Hold up, Greg, didn’t you have a fiancée?”

“A political engagement, yeah. I told ya before, we only saw each other a couple of times.”

“Right. Got it. Meatheads like you are a total waste of oxygen.”

“Hey!”

First Julius, and now Greg. Was I going to get anything out of these guys? My hopeful gaze turned to Chris, but my hopes for him were already dim. He seemed the least romantically inclined of the bunch.

“Okay, then how about you, Chris?”

“A date, hm? Once, when I went strolling through the capital with Marie, we stopped to watch a duel. I explained the finer points of swordplay as we observed, and she listened eagerly, which made me quite happy.” Chris smiled to himself as he recounted his fond memories of prior outings.

I stared at him. *Yep. Strike him off too.* I was asking about dates in *general*, but the only thing he could think to do was ramble about Marie.

Sighing, I turned to Brad next. “Okay, Mr. Self-Proclaimed Adonis, what’ve you got for me?”

“Self-proclaimed? My beauty is a fact, I will have you know!”

I shrugged. “A fact in your head maybe, but not in the world at large. Now come on, cough up the deets.”

Brad, ever the narcissist, combed his hand through long locks of purple hair, trailing them through his fingers. “Hmph. For anyone as stunningly gorgeous as me, dating is merely one part of the daily routine.”

“Come again?”

“I’m sure it’s difficult for you to comprehend, but I leave a lasting impact on women purely by virtue of spending time near them. You could say that, by simple dint of my existence, I make everyone else’s day special.” Brad winked at me, clearly drunk off his own special brand of crazy.

I shook my head and turned, finally, to Jilk. “You’re the last one up to bat.” I sighed. “Although I know this is going to be an exercise in futility.”

Jilk’s lips were firmly pursed, his eyebrows twitching in irritation. “Please refrain from lumping me in with the others. Not only do I possess a wealth of romantic experience, but I am also skilled at pleasing women.”

The moment he boasted about his popularity, the other four shot him dirty looks. Was he being bullied? No, that wasn't it. This was par for the course, if anything.

While Jilk reeked of confidence, I was all too familiar with his past. “‘Skilled at pleasing women,’ huh? Did you forget all the awful stuff you did to Miss Clarice?”

I was referring to our upperclassman, Clarice Fia Atlee, aka Jilk's former fiancée. Jilk had refused to see her after annulling his engagement, thereby leaving a whole mess that I'd been swept up in. Not that he seemed to feel the least bit ashamed for the role he'd played.

“I am aware that I wronged her. However, it was for the best that I refrained from meeting with her at the time. If apologizing would have solved the problem, obviously I would have immediately done so.”

“Then freakin’ apologize already.”

The nonsense that this guy could spew!

Jilk averted his gaze, brows furrowing and eyes growing sorrowful, as if he suddenly felt sorry for me. “I feel as though I've done you a disservice as well. But, you see...Clarice is rather, how shall we say...suffocating.”

“I've never seen her choke anybody out.”

“Please tell me you don't think I mean that literally. I am trying to tell you that she is, ah, ‘clingy.’ Her love is intense.”

“Sure, she's a super nice person.”

Jilk pressed a hand to his forehead, already exhausted by my apparent failure to understand. “Your utter cluelessness is nearly admirable. But I'm telling you now, she is *extremely* suffocating. This transpired quite a while ago, but one day, I set eyes upon a brand-new airbike and became wholly entranced. I spoke not a word of my interest in it, mind you.” Jilk was only recounting ancient history, yet for some reason, cold beads of sweat trickled down his brow. “The very next day, Clarice had that bike sent straight to my home.”

“It was a present, right? Weren't you happy?”

“You aren’t the sharpest tool in the shed, are you? When I first laid eyes on that bike, Clarice was not with me.”

I blinked. “Wait, hold on a second...”

“I have no idea where or from whom she heard of my interest, but somehow, she sent me the exact bike that had captured my attention. If this were the only incident of its sort, one might dismiss it as coincidence. Alas, similar events occurred, again and again.” Jilk’s eyes glazed over.

The rest of the guys stood there with conflicted looks, as if they weren’t even sure what to say.

Huh. So Miss Clarice is clingy. Honestly, part of me didn’t really see the problem with what Jilk described. It wasn’t *that* extreme.

Jilk seemed to sense this difference of opinion. “You know,” he said, “I’ve wondered this for a while now, but do you perhaps have a predilection for clingy women?”

“Nah, not particularly.”

“Are you entirely sure about that? From my perspective, every single one of the women to whom you are engaged seems quite emotionally...heavy, to put it lightly.”

If Angie and the others were heavy, then Marie was light as a feather, given how easily her loyalties swayed. *Although I guess these guys are into that type. I prefer a safer option. Normal girls all the way.*

“Anyway, what’s your perfect date?” I asked.

“If you wish to inspire the lady’s interest, I recommend taking her to a place to which she is unaccustomed. If you invite her to a cheap restaurant frequented by the commonfolk, I suspect she will find the experience invigorating. By contrast, splurging on an experience with which she is largely accustomed will provide precious little excitement at all.”

Jilk’s advice was, much to my surprise, decent.

“You may be a conniving coward, but you’re pretty reliable, huh?”

It was hard to believe, considering how utterly useless Jilk’s opinions normally

were. *That settles it. I'll have to take Angie somewhere she's never been before.*

While I began inwardly debating what place would be best, Julius approached me. "Leon, do you have a moment? Assuming you haven't already eaten lunch, come with me."

"With *you*?" I quirked a brow.

Julius and I sat ourselves down on a bench behind the main school building, gnawing away at the skewered kebabs we had bought from a food stall. Julius had introduced me to the joint, and the meat was surprisingly delicious.

That said, Julius sent me an apologetic glance for reasons I couldn't determine. "My apologies. If I only had a touch more time, I would grill them for you myself."

"You're practically a grill fiend. Take a break during lunch, why don't you?" I tore into the meat. "Anyway, what do you want to talk about?"

There was a short pause before Julius finally said, "It's about Angie."

I froze.

Julius's expression was solemn. "I betrayed her once."

That established, I resumed eating. "Yes, you did."

"When I think back on that now, I realize I failed to see the bigger picture."

"Give yourself some credit. You still don't see the bigger picture."

"I see it better than I did," Julius assured me. "No, perhaps it's because I'm no longer within the frame that I can more clearly discern its contents."

What exactly is he getting at?

After all that preamble, Julius finally cut to the heart of the matter. "I realize I've no right to ask this after all I've done, but please: Don't betray Angie."

"Me? Like hell I'd ever—"

"Your actions need not come from a place of treachery in order to constitute betrayal. Understand?"

I wanted to snap at him, to argue the point—but for some reason, his words cut pretty deep. I went silent as I worked through my kebabs.

“When I annulled my engagement to Angie, I did not *intend* to wound her so,” Julius said. “In fact, I thought I had been stabbed in the back.”

“You were pretty much total garbo back then.”

“I will acknowledge this. But how does that reflect on you and your actions now?”

“What’re you trying to say?”

Julius finished the rest of his kebab and neatly gathered the empty container and skewers. He disposed of them appropriately rather than littering, as some of our peers might have.

“I merely hope you don’t repeat my mistake. If Angelica believes you have betrayed her trust, she will not recover.”

“But I told you, there’s no way in hell I’m doing that,” I insisted before cutting myself off. I had to admit that from an outside point of view, my actions were perhaps dubious. Every weekend, I spent my time partying with Marie and Erica, as well as occasionally sending a letter to Queen Mylene. I wasn’t trying to “betray” anyone with my behavior, but if that was how Angie had interpreted it, my intent meant all of jack and squat.

I dropped my gaze.

Julius’s lips thinned, and his brows furrowed. After a moment, he said, “As a friend, let me say just one more thing.”

“What?”

“I will refrain from asking you to cease flirting with my mother. My only request is that you do so where I needn’t see it. As her son, it’s incredibly awkward for me.”

His forehead crinkled in direct proportion to how much it weirded him out—which was to say more than a little. Even I felt awkward.

“R-right...”

For now, the best thing to do was to agree. Probably.

Finally, the weekend returned. Angie was all dolled up in a flashy red dress that perfectly matched the color of her eyes. She clutched a small, white handbag in both hands, and a pair of high heels adorned her feet. Her ensemble was immaculately thought out; no matter how casual or formal the setting, she'd fit right in. This was how I found her waiting at our meeting place.

Even though I was officially ten minutes ahead of schedule, I quickly said, "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Angie shook her head. "No, you're perfectly on time. I just came too early."

"Oh, okay..."

We typically spent most of our time together, but for our date, I'd expressly requested we meet up at this location. The idiot brigade had advised me to do so, emphasizing the importance of making this day stand out. I had evidently accomplished that much. The change of pace was strangely thrilling, yet we were both feeling awkward.

As we started walking, Luxion ducked in close so only I could hear him. "Master, are you certain you do not wish to compliment Angelica's appearance? It seems to me she put in significant effort for today's outing."

I hadn't even realized my blunder until he brought it up. Hastily, I blurted, "Angie, those clothes look great on you!"

"Do they? Thanks." Angie smiled, but I got the sense that I'd screwed up big time.

In a dating game, I wouldn't just have screwed myself out of some affection points. I'd have earned a sting of sad music to indicate my failure.

Games were so simple. You could easily reload for a redo. Reality didn't have the grace to offer me a save button for retries, let alone a console reset button. The only button life had to show for itself was the "off" button.

"Sorry. I should have said something sooner," I said.

"Don't apologize. You should be more confident in yourself."

“Yeah, but...”

“It’s fine. Let’s go.”

Angie sped up, so I was left scrambling to keep up. Luxion regarded us, disappointed but not surprised.

“Master, your natural charm is best deployed *naturally*. The moment you strive for self-awareness, it utterly backfires.”

As we strolled about the capital, we noticed scaffolding had been erected around some of the old buildings for disassembly. A suit of Armor geared for construction was gradually removing the rubble.

Angie paused and watched. “They certainly are rushing to rebuild if they’re going as far as to bring expensive Armors to do the work.”

Armors were, for the most part, fueled by magic stones. Any stones unearthed from the dungeons in the capital were quickly bought up to be used as energy. Unfortunately, supply always fell short of the constant demand, which drove up prices. It wasn’t usually profitable to employ construction Armors like this one. The only reason anyone turned a blind eye to the expense was because this was the capital.

“Guess no matter where you are, the rich get to do whatever they like,” I muttered cynically.

Angie glanced at me and sighed.

“What? Am I wrong?”

I hadn’t said anything bad...had I? I was starting to second-guess myself.

“No, your comment wasn’t precisely wrong,” Angie explained. “But I’m sure even the kingdom’s coffers are strapped. It hasn’t been long since our war with the former principality. The capital didn’t have a chance to recover before it was hit again.”

Fair point. The capital had sustained mass casualties twice in a short period of time. It made sense that the public finance budget would be a little thin on the ground. Furthermore, Angie seemed to have insight into who was behind the

rushed reconstruction effort.

“They’re also in a hurry because they hope to preserve the country’s prestige. If the scars of war are left to linger, the regional nobility will notice, and they’ll interpret them to mean that the current royal family’s power has weakened. Her Majesty must be quite stressed trying to contain the situation.”

“Really? You think Miss Mylene is that stressed out?”

For a split second, Angie’s expression darkened. I slapped a hand over my mouth. I’d called the queen by her first name. *Great, now you’ve done it.*

Angie forced herself to smile. “It’s a relief that you aren’t the same age as Her Majesty.”

“Oh, no, I’m not seriously trying to flirt with her or anything.” It sounded like an excuse, and I knew it.

“I’m aware. Anyway, how about we return to our date?”

“Y-yeah...”

We resumed walking, heading toward the café I had selected. Its exterior was inviting, and the equally relaxed atmosphere inside made it easy to settle in. The furnishings were beautifully maintained, and a mouthwatering aroma filled the air. Their menu offered a selection of coffee and light meals.

Upon entering, we strolled up to the counter, where the owner promptly guided us to a window table and offered us menus. Angie and I exchanged only a couple of words before deciding on our orders. The owner jotted everything down before returning to the counter.

I was relieved this establishment had been spared by the destruction.

“What a nice place,” Angie said, her words almost perfectly echoing my thoughts.

“It really is. I haven’t come here before, but I think I like it.”

“It does seem like it would appeal to you.”

I supposed she was right. “Do you not like it?”

“I don’t hate it, although I’m a bit bothered to see they don’t serve my favorite tea. I expect it doesn’t appeal to the owner.”

“Oh.”

Only after Angie said this did I take a good look at the menu and realize she was right—her beloved tea wasn’t on the list. Nor were there any of her preferred kinds of snacks. I’d screwed up again. I cradled my head in my hands. “Sorry. I should have looked into the menu more closely.”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“Yeah, but today’s date is supposed to be for you, so...”

“I already told you, I’m not bothered. You’re a duke now. You mustn’t apologize for something so insignificant.”

“But I still feel bad.”

As I tried to apologize again, Angie slammed her fist on the table. “I told you, *it doesn’t bother me!*”

My eyes went round with shock. “Angie...?”

The other customers turned toward us. Even the café owner eyed our table. I quickly gestured to assure them that it was nothing, at which point Angie seemed to realize what she’d done.

“I-I’m sorry,” she stammered, cheeks flushing. For a moment, she lowered her gaze to her lap. Then, unable to withstand the shame, she shot up and flew to the door, disappearing outside.

“Angie!” I shouted, scrambling out of my seat to follow. I paused only when I remembered we’d already ordered and stopped at the counter to slam down some money. “Forget the change. Keep it all.”

When I burst out of the café door, the entrance bell rang noisily in my wake. I scanned the street, but I saw no sign of Angie.

“Crap! Where’d she go?!”

“Never fear,” Luxion said. “I am tracking her location. Shall I commence navigation?”

“Please.”

I sprinted through the city as Luxion guided me.

“All right, how’d I mess up?” I asked.

For once, Luxion didn’t seem to have a clear answer. “While it is possible she resented your repeated show of timidity, that seems an unlikely explanation. After all, you have demonstrated your pathetic, shiftless nature countless times before.”

“Jeez, sorry for being such a wuss!”

“Perhaps she is mentally fatigued. Though I suspect it is more likely that she is irritated by your miserable failure to live up to her ideals.”

“She does seem the type to have high standards.”

“Even so, she agreed to your engagement,” Luxion reminded me. “Surely she is well aware of the gap between reality and her idealized projections.”

As I listened, I skidded to a halt. “You mean...she’s fed up with me?”

I’d kinda suspected that might happen one day. It was inevitable. Maybe the time had finally come.

Luxion shook back and forth, as if *tsk*-ing at me. “If she were so easily aggravated, she never would have agreed to your engagement. Master, you doubt Angelica’s love for you.”

“Even the fires of love can cool to embers.”

“Most certainly. That does happen. However, that is not the case today. Angelica was very much looking forward to this date.”

I started walking again. As I headed toward Angie’s location, I spotted an overlook. Angie clutched the railed fencing at the edge, gazing out at the capital below. As I approached, she turned to me. Her eyes were red and puffy. She’d been crying.

“Angie, uh, I—”

“Don’t apologize. I’ll only feel worse if you do.”

“Huh?”

“Making you apologize like that...makes me hate myself,” Angie confessed as she broke into sobs.

We took a seat on a nearby bench. As I waited for Angie to calm down, the sun began its descent. Occasionally, people approached the overlook, only to sense the awkward atmosphere. One look at us and they assumed we were in the middle of a break up, at which point they promptly retreated.

As for me, I was kind of inept when it came to crying women.

Once Angie finally gathered herself, she said, “I apologize for my earlier behavior.”

“No, don’t worry about that. What’s this about you hating yourself?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like.”

“Uh...”

Sensing that our exchange was going absolutely nowhere, Luxion cut in on my behalf. “Angelica, why do you feel personally responsible for my master’s apologies? His pathetic, shiftless nature is his own fault.”

Oof. Gun to my head, I could admit that this was not an inaccurate assessment of my personality, but hearing him say it so bluntly kinda pissed me off. I swallowed back my complaints. It wasn’t the time to bicker.

Tears in her eyes, Angie looked up at Luxion and tilted her head as if *she* was confused. “Leon is a duke. He is, moreover, a hero who has saved this kingdom a number of times.”

“In other words, in the eyes of society, my master’s rank behooves him to be sparing in his apologies. Is that what you’re trying to communicate?”

“Yes. And yet all I do is make him apologize—constantly! I’m meant to be his wife one day, but I can’t even properly support him.” Angie cupped her hands over her face as she wept.

“That really doesn’t matter to me,” I said.

I was only trying to express my genuine feelings, but Angie didn’t seem to

grasp my intended meaning.

“It doesn’t *matter*? Are you saying I’m unworthy of you? That I’m of no use? Although I suppose you’re right. After all, you have Luxion.” Angie lifted her head, tears spilling down her cheeks as she started to laugh.

“Come on, that’s not what I mean! Being ‘of use’ and all that crap doesn’t—”

While I tried desperately to clarify, Luxion cut me off. “Master, I am calling a time-out. Let us return to the dormitory.”

“That’s not what—”

“Not what matters right now, I presume? However, I believe that at this point, you both require distance.”

Angie resumed sobbing. Even I could tell I wasn’t going to convince her of anything just yet.

“Let’s go back,” I agreed. “But before we do, let me say just one thing: Never once have I not wanted you in my life, Angie.”

Alas, my words seemed to fall on deaf ears.

“It seems that neither of us truly knows the other,” said Angie.

After escorting Angie back to the girls’ dormitory, I returned to my room, where I collapsed on my bed and stared up at the ceiling.

“I have a report from Cleare,” Luxion announced. “Livia comforted Angelica after her return, and she has now fallen asleep. Having heard a recounting from Angelica, Livia seems to be quite angry with you.”

“And what would she have had me do differently, huh?”

Seriously, where did I go wrong? I understood Angie was doing her best for my sake. All I’d wanted to communicate today was that she didn’t have to push herself like that. She didn’t have to stand against her family just for me. Not only had we failed to make up after that whole disagreement—if you could even call it that—she’d left me with that heartbreaking parting shot.

“‘Neither of us truly knows the other,’ huh? Guess she’s got a point. We only

got here by sheer momentum. It's natural she'd be disappointed when she got up close only to see how shallow I really am."

"While I am impressed that you have at long last managed to accurately assess yourself, there is a different problem at play," said Luxion.

"What problem is that?"

"A difference in values. Master, you and Marie cling a touch too hard to the values instilled in you during your previous life. If I may speculate based on the information Cleare has acquired, it is likely that Angelica wishes to be a supportive presence in your life."

"But she's always been plenty supportive."

Angie was so amazing that she was basically wasted on a guy like me. I knew that painfully well, which was why I didn't want her going above and beyond for me.

"Indeed, Angelica thinks far too highly of you. However, you managed to achieve ducal rank in a single generation, and you are furthermore lauded as a hero by the people. That has doubtless put immense pressure on her as your partner. She has worked tirelessly to stand on equal footing with you, so from her perspective, it is as though you are dismissing her efforts as futile. Is it not perfectly reasonable for her to be irritated?"

"I don't get it."

"Angelica has been preventing her family, House Redgrave, from manipulating you for their own ends. No one her age should have to bear such a hardship."

"I couldn't give a rat's ass about the Redgraves and their support—or lack thereof. As long as I've got Angie, I'm good."

"Do you truly believe that, if you said this to Angelica, she would be satisfied?" Luxion challenged me.

I went silent.

"Master, this world is not the one that first raised you. It operates on its own set of rules. It is arrogance to casually dismiss actions based on standards other

than your own.”

Maybe so. Thanks to my past memories, I was beholden to a set of values that often clashed with the ones upheld by this world. Because of those values, I couldn't gel with noble society. I considered all the stuffy formality a huge pain, so I tried to distance myself and ignore it. But I'd risen too high to keep up that behavior. The problem was that there was nothing I could do about that kind of schism; as I recalled, more than one married couple had divorced for that very reason.

“A difference in values can be fatal. Maybe I should just annul our engagement so that Angie can be free and—”

I broke off as I remembered Julius's warning.

That's right. He said that if I betray her trust, she won't recover.

“I guess...everything'll be fine as long as I do things Angie's way, right?”

“Master, are you truly capable of acclimating to this world's noble society?”
Luxion asked, unconvinced.

“Nah, ain't no way. But if nothing else, I can put up a good front. I'll go pop by the Redgrave estate soon.”

Even if blending in was beyond me, I could always play the part. Surely. It had worked for me more than once before.

Chapter 3:

Devotee

WHEN I ARRIVED at the Redgraves' estate "for no particular reason," Mr. Vince himself—Angie's daddy—came out to welcome me.

"What a pleasure to have you," he said. "I returned to the capital the moment I heard you were coming."

"Uh, right..."

Normally, Mr. Vince and Mr. Gilbert took turns staying in the capital while the other returned to their territory, but here the duke himself had gone out of his way to be present for my visit. I was, how do you say, floored.

Once inside, Mr. Vince brought a visitor to see me as I waited in his parlor. The man looked at me expectantly, and though I had been informed of our meeting ahead of time, I wasn't quite sure who he was.

"Um, this is...?" I asked.

"A man to whom I am most eager to introduce you."

The man in question bowed his head respectfully. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Duke Bartfort. I am Earl Dominic Fou Mottley."

The middle name Fou indicated a regional lord, and being an earl, he likely presided over a vast territory. Curiously, Earl Mottley looked to only be in his thirties. His silky blond hair curled outward, his pristine facial hair was meticulously maintained, and he was thin yet slightly toned. Not a bad-looking guy.

"Earl Mottley and I go back a ways, you see," Mr. Vince explained. "His territory is a floating island, and he is one of the lords entrusted with protecting our nation's border."

"Our border, eh?" I echoed, glancing at him.

Earl Mottley smiled. "My family hardly stands alone to protect the realm from

our neighbors. We regional lords act under the command of our marquess. The onus of that duty regretfully compelled me to remain rather than heed your summons to serve, Duke Bartfort.”

“Uh-huh...”

The earl was a skilled flatterer, I had to give him that. At the time of that war, my reputation had been in the gutter. Okay, maybe it hadn’t been *that* bad. But the kingdom’s people sure hadn’t thought much of me. No one but an idiot would have willingly answered my call.

Mr. Vince added, “Earl Mottley is a fan of yours, you see.”

“Huh?” I looked to him again, shocked.

The earl grabbed my hand with both of his and shook it vigorously. “Word of your accomplishments left a deep, indescribable impact on my heart. I had my eye on you the year before last, after all that commotion over your duel with the crown prince and his friends—but your unparalleled exploits have surpassed even my imagination.”

“My unparalleled what now?!” I racked my brain, trying to figure out what he could possibly mean.

Earl Mottley grinned. “You saw the decisive end of those vile customs to which the kingdom once cleaved.”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

Was this guy one of the many who’d suffered at the hands of the abjectly evil girls at school? My guess, as it turned out, was right on the money.

“During my father’s rule, we were granted the honorable title of earl, though when I attended the academy, we were still a viscounty. My fiancée was repugnant.”

“Oh. I don’t know what to say...”

He must still be suffering if that’s the case. Fortunately, this time, reality betrayed my expectations.

“She really was an awful woman. She surrounded herself with a number of lovers before we even had a child. Whose baby was she planning to have? Well,

I digress. You brought that whole insufferable system crumbling down! Thank you. Truly, thank you!”

“Huh? Huh?!”

As I gaped, Mr. Vince kindly explained, “Earl Mottley was able to divorce his wife on the grounds of her infidelity.”

“Huh?! Really?!”

A marriage in noble society was wasn’t just a union of people; it connected their houses. You didn’t dissolve a marriage due to mere personal dissatisfaction. Worse, in the past, the kingdom had forbidden dissolution purely on the basis of unfaithful conduct. This had changed when society was flipped on its head. The second the royal administration had okayed marital separation, Earl Mottley left his wife.

“I owe my gratitude to Duke Redgrave as well,” Earl Mottley added. “I can’t thank him enough for what he did for my wife.”

Wife? I tilted my head.

“I remarried,” he explained. “My wife was a servant, one who had been at my side supporting me for many years, but because of her lowly status, we were unable to join our hands in marriage. But I was able to call on Duke Redgrave’s assistance.”

Mr. Vince went on, “A knight family in our circle adopted her, after which a viscount took her into his house. After tutoring her in the ways of her new status, they married her off to Earl Mottley.”

Wasn’t that basically identity fraud? I mean, Earl Mottley had basically paid off Mr. Vince to give his wife—who had no claim to the nobility—the technical qualifications he needed to marry her... Right? Even if he hadn’t literally paid for it, they had definitely struck some sort of bargain.

While I pondered this, Earl Mottley continued. “I am nowhere near close to standing on equal footing as either of you. Even so, I heard of your role in this latest incident in the capital. In a single night, you brought the entire city to heel. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that a man of your caliber—a first-generation duke, and a hero on top of that—is simply built of stronger stuff

than the rest of us.”

Things would be so much easier if I could just tell him the truth—that it was all thanks to Luxion. Instead, I opted for the safer route of demurring and saying we’d saved the day with all our efforts combined, but before I opened my mouth, Earl Mottley cut me off.

“However, I do think you were a bit lax. I would have ensured the capital took more lasting damage.”

My jaw dropped. “What are you talking about?”

For some reason, Earl Mottley looked equally shocked.

Mr. Vince clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Apologies,” he said. “Earl Mottley succeeded his father with unusual speed, and his manners have yet to catch up.”

Earl Mottley nodded and smiled at once. “I’m afraid so. It was all so sudden, and my etiquette is lacking. Though I am sure most would consider my position enviable.”

Those two were having a conversation that I didn’t follow. I gave Luxion the signal to decipher what the heck was going on here.

“Dominic was under the impression you had thrown your lot in with the Redgraves and intended to turn your back on the royal family. Your obliviousness has likely made him suspicious.”

So that’s it.

Earl Mottley returned his gaze to me. “Duke Bartfort, why don’t we join hands to ensure the capital is swallowed in flames?”

“That’s not a very funny joke.”

“A joke? Are you not a regional lord yourself? Surely you understand. For generations, we have been tyrannized by a kingdom that treats us with outright animosity. Should they not pay for the suffering they’ve wrought?” His eyes watched me closely, trying to ascertain my position. At the same time, I realized that he was completely serious about his envisioned sea of flames.

“Earl Mottley,” said Mr. Vince, “let’s not be hasty. You could do with more

discretion.”

“My apologies. It seems I let myself get carried away, what with the excitement. To think I’d meet the hero I have for so long admired!”

Once Earl Mottley left, it was just Mr. Vince and me.

He chuckled. “As one might expect from an aristocrat fighting at our borders, the man is intense. I hope you will forgive his impudence, for my sake.”

“Do you truly intend to go to war with the kingdom?” I asked bluntly.

Mr. Vince’s smile never faltered. “It seems you and Angie had a recent disagreement. Really, what is that daughter of mine thinking?”

Just who had told him that our relationship was on the rocks?

“Please answer me,” I said. “If you are truly serious about this, I *will* stop you.”

Mr. Vince’s voice dropped lower as he answered, “Even if you uphold the kingdom by pure force, if things remain as they are, the people’s dissatisfaction will swell until the dam inevitably breaks. Am I arrogant to strive to limit the ensuing casualties as much as possible?”

“What do you mean, ‘dissatisfaction’?”

“You heard Earl Mottley, did you not? He and his brethren lords have been continuously oppressed by the realm; they are profoundly dissatisfied. The balance has lately changed, and it gradually improves, but do you really think that sufficient? That you can tell them to forgive, forget, and obediently abide?”

“Well, I, uh...”

I followed the argument. Just because things had improved didn’t mean the long-simmering resentment and disapproval would magically vanish. If anything, a ton of aristocrats seemed eager to take revenge for their grievances by taking out the weakened royal family.

So that’s why he brought Earl Mottley here—to show me that the regional lords are serious about this whole treason business.

“This sacrifice is necessary. If the chaos of rebellion is allowed to descend

once again, Holfort will be divided, and we will be left vulnerable to the wolves at the border. We must ensure that does not happen, no matter the cost.” Again, he clapped me on the shoulder. “I have great hopes for you. So long as we have your Lost Item to call on, we can minimize the bloodshed. As for Angie, I’ll be sure to have a word with her regarding her behavior.”

Is this what Angie’s been dealing with all this time?

After returning from the Redgrave estate, I found myself on the bed in my dorm room, engaging in my age-old pastime of staring up at the ceiling.

“Best to minimize loss of life since a rebellion is inevitable, huh?” I muttered, contemplating Mr. Vince’s final words.

Luxion, hovering close by as always, said, “While it would be an effective solution, the Redgraves are related to the current royal family. A number of aristocrats would likely be less than pleased to see them head this rebellion. In fact, one wrong move, and House Redgrave could find themselves sharing a grave with the royals.”

He had a point. With their close ties to the throne, many regional lords probably nursed just as much hatred for the Redgraves. Their only real option for survival was to stand at the head of the insurrection and establish the kingdom anew.

“They could just protect the crown,” I said.

“If they weren’t so driven by ambition. Vince and Gilbert seek the right to rule.”

“Can’t relate.”

“While their true aim is likely to seize the throne, their desire to reduce casualties due to rebellion is sincere. You must understand that you are a genuine hero in the eyes of the regional lords, Master.”

I sighed. “What, because I broke the chains that kept them shackled to awful marriages?”

“That is indeed a contributing factor. Moreover, you have forced the kingdom

to change where it otherwise refused to do so. That makes you the champion they have long desired.”

“Hah, some champion.”

“Marrying Angelica will necessarily mean joining hands with the Redgraves. In this world, individuals are not considered separate entities from the families into which they were born.”

I had heard that, in the distant past, when people died far more easily and frequently, a greater emphasis had been placed on one’s family than on any given individual. Death was a looming, ever-present phantom, so people prioritized the preservation of their house and bloodline. Kinda brought home how much nicer it was to live in a world that respected individual rights. I knew what that was like—had tasted the happiness that brought. Angie, meanwhile, had only ever known the tenets of this society. Maybe it was only natural that we didn’t see eye to eye.

“Anyway, what’re your thoughts?” I asked.

“On what?”

“On uniting the kingdom without casualties. Can we do it while keeping the amount of blood spilled to a minimum?”

What kind of reply would an AI like Luxion give to a question like this? I had a yen for some astounding, hitherto unheard of solution that would allow me to keep everybody happy.

“The swiftest solution would be for you to take personal control of the capital, which would convince the lords of neighboring territories to put down their weapons as well as their thirst for revenge. Then we could gather those like Dominic, who deeply respect you, to the capital and rebuild the nation. That would be the path of least bloodshed.”

Well, more fool me for asking, I guess.

“So, basically, what you’re saying is...”

“That you should become king, Master.”

“You moron. No way I’m going through with that.”

Me, a king? Maybe other people wanted that kind of power, but it wasn't my cup of tea. In fact, I was still keen on the idea of holing up in the countryside and spending my days in idle peace.

"You reject my proposal even though it would result in the fewest number of casualties?" Luxion asked.

"If you're proposing I use your power to rule the kingdom, then that would make me no better than the Redgraves." I sighed deeply. "It was stupid to even ask you."

I was essentially calling Luxion's suggestion worthless, which annoyed him. He edged closer until he was right in my face. "Might I remind you, Master, that you failed to devise your own solution, which is why you requested my input."

"Yeah, and that's why I'm owning up to asking in the first place."



Besides, Luxion wouldn't care if Holfort bit the dust. He'd probably be happy to see the end of a country built by the new humans. Whenever problems like this popped up, he was usually the one saying, "Why don't we *burn it all to the ground?*" Stuff like that.

"Guess I should ask someone else. But Angie's usually my go-to for these types of things, and she's the one person I can't rely on right now."

"Indeed. Your reliance on her is both incessant and excessive."

"Oh, put a sock in it."

As I stared up at the ceiling, I contemplated who best to approach. A number of faces popped into my head, but my mind focused on one person in particular—someone who'd dealt with a similar situation.

Hering was outside, watering one of the flower beds close to the dormitory. As I confided my current straits in him, he neither derided me nor laughed at my situation. Instead, his face screwed into a frown.

"A difference in values? That is a tricky situation. I've found myself challenged countless times by that very problem since my reincarnation."

"You too, huh?" I asked.

"Comes with having memories from our previous lives." The shadows on Hering's face were dark as he sighed. He tilted his head back and gazed at the sky. "After becoming a knight, I was forced to participate in war."

"I see."

The air as he spoke made it easy to imagine what he had endured. Neither knights nor nobles could run from battle. A deserter would lose their status and reputation. They were raised to believe that fighting itself was an honor. Those who slaughtered enemies en masse on the battlefield were hailed as heroes.

As such, neither I nor Hering enjoyed being regarded as such. To be called a "hero" was to be called a mass murderer.

Hering scratched the back of his head, sensing what I was feeling. "We've

both been through a lot. Maybe it'd be better if we could just erase our old memories, but... No, without those, I wouldn't have realized what a dire situation Mia was in."

It was true that we probably wouldn't be facing such difficulty without our pasts hanging over us, but that same knowledge was the reason I was standing here right now, alive and well. Meanwhile, without his, Hering would never have met Mia.

"Yeah, if not for mine, I'd probably be six feet under by now," I said.

From the day Zola sold me off, I would've died, one way or another. I was glad to have reincarnated with my memories intact.

Hering forced a smile. "You must really have had it rough."

"It's a huge help having you here. I can't go to the idiot brigade with concerns like these."

"But you have Marie, don't you?"

True, Marie was in our boat in a sense, but there was a notable difference between her and Hering.

"She's never killed anyone in battle," I said.

"Right, yeah. I guess you wouldn't be able to go to her about that. It'd be better if her hands remained unstained." He stared off into the distance.

I gave a small nod. Marie participating in battle? That didn't suit her at all.

Hering placed his hand on his chin as he contemplated. "If only we were in Vordenoit, then we could consult His Imperial Majesty."

My jaw dropped. "The emperor, you mean? You, uh, must be on awfully good terms with him." I could hardly believe he'd suggest such a thing, let alone so casually.

Hering's eyes widened as it dawned on him. "Oh, I didn't tell you, did I? Our emperor—Mia's father, I mean—also reincarnated here."

"You're kidding me!"

Wasn't this getting kind of ridiculous? Just how many people had

reincarnated to this world? While I was busy being flabbergasted by this newest revelation, Hering continued.

“He can be an annoying old codger, but he’s reliable at times like this. Hasn’t lived all those years for nothing. Not only does he share our experience, but he’s lived a whole life already. If only there were someone like him we could consult.”

His words triggered a realization—there *was* one person in the kingdom who perfectly fit that bill.

“Erica,” I muttered.

I immediately made my way to Erica. She was surrounded by a huge entourage, given it was a weekday, but they cleared a path as I approached. I managed to invite her to one of the tea rooms, where we settled in to discuss the issues plaguing me.

“So, Uncle, to ensure I understand the issue... You are deeply troubled over the difference in your values and Miss Angelica’s, correct?”

“That’s right.”

It was a little embarrassing, honestly, to consult my niece about my own love life, but who else could I turn to? She was my best bet.

Yet as if to take a dig at my shame, Luxion added, “You may be his niece, but you have far more experience than he does.”

“Do you ever—I dunno—consider the idea of giving your master more respect? I’d be nicer to you if you showed me a little more compassion, y’know?”

“Unnecessary. I do not require your ‘niceness.’”

Erica snickered as she watched us. “You have such a close friendship.”

Great, another person who mistakes our constant hostility for some kind of wholesome.

“Erica, do you not see how rude and disrespectful this jerk is?” I asked.

“It’s important to have friends with whom you can speak freely, Uncle. Relatedly, I can tell just how important Miss Angelica is to you.” Erica smiled. She displayed such forbearance that it was difficult to believe she was actually younger than me—at least physically.

I averted my gaze. “Well, we’ve been through a lot together.”

“You should be honest and tell her that you love her. Uncle, you really aren’t the type to open up, are you?”

“Open up? I’m always open. I’m *honest*. I say what I think the moment it pops into my head—which is why everyone keeps their distance,” I said with a laugh.

Erica kept smiling. Her gaze fixed on me, and for some reason, it was as though she could stare right into my core. I quickly looked away. Fortunately, she didn’t scold me for getting childish. Instead, she proposed a solution.

“If you truly wish to be with Miss Angelica, then I think treating her with gentle kindness won’t bear the fruit you desire.”

“Huh?” I jerked my head back around to face Erica. The smile was gone; she was being completely serious now.

“Miss Angelica wishes to support you. No, more than that, she wants to stand at your side as your equal and achieve accomplishments of her own.”

“Really? That’s what Angie wants?”

“Uncle, have you forgotten? Once, Miss Angelica was to be the queen of Holfort.”

That was true. If not for Marie’s interference, her engagement to Julius would have seen her become our queen. I *knew* that. I hadn’t forgotten.

“Yeah, I’m aware,” I insisted.

“Then you must not understand what that really means. Miss Angelica was raised and educated to possess all the necessary qualities of a queen. For her, being protected and coddled is suffocating.”

So she doesn’t just want to sit by while I protect her. I guess she did say something like that before. We didn’t even think the same way, then; I was content to take the easy road by relying on Luxion for everything.

Erica went on, “She wants to stand beside you—to see and feel what you do, to rely on you, yes, but also to have you rely upon her. The problem is that you manage to do everything all by yourself.”

“I wouldn’t really say it’s ‘all by myself,’” I muttered.

A smile spread across Erica’s lips as she tilted her head the tiniest degree. “Let me teach you a trick—one that will enable you to seamlessly patch up your relationship problems.”

A few days after her disastrous date with Leon, Angie was walking down an academy corridor after school. To be more exact, Livia was pulling her along, and though Angie wasn’t too keen on going to their destination, Livia wouldn’t let up.

“Angie, it’s already past time.”

“Calm down, Livia. As soon as I wrap up a few more things, I’ll head over.”

Livia shook her head. She saw straight through Angie’s excuse. “No. You plan to keep your distance from Mr. Leon and not participate at all, don’t you?”

“How can I face him?” Angie asked, ashamed. “I don’t want him to hate me anymore than he must already.”

“Then that’s all the more reason to meet with him! Everyone else is already there, I’m sure.” Livia continued dragging her along until they arrived at their destination: a classroom.

While the classrooms were typically filled with students, once school let out and all their classmates headed home, the rooms became quiet—actually, maybe not so quiet today. Leon’s voice boomed from inside.

“I already told you: No, no, and hell no!”

A number of other voices echoed within as well.

Angie and Livia traded glances.

“Just what kind of gathering is this?” Angie asked. “You know, don’t you, Livia?”

Livia shook her head. “No. I only know that this is so Mr. Leon can make things up to you.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” Angie asked. Knowing he wanted to clear the air was music to her ears. But then Leon’s thundering voice blasted through the closed door.

“Go home! Go! I’m begging you!”

Leon was howling, pleading with whomever else was inside to leave. And Angie could hear the recipient of his words firmly refuse. Finally plucking up her courage, Angie slid the door open. When she peeked into the classroom, she found the usual culprits already present.

Noelle’s here. Hm? Isn’t that Prince Jake and his friends? And there are even the exchange students from the empire. Oh my, and Princess Erica too?!

This classroom was a lecture theater with desks staggered on elevated tiers. Leon was standing at the podium in the middle, repeatedly slamming his open hand against it. Marie and her merry band were standing immediately in front of him. At present, it was as if their usual roles had switched; Leon was the one pleading with Marie and her companions.

“I didn’t call you here! Please, I’m begging you, just *go home!* I’ll *pay* you to leave!”

Despite his offer of financial compensation, Marie and company refused to budge. Normally, the second Leon dangled money in front of them, they obediently did as directed.

“And leave the rest of you to have a good time all by yourselves?!” Marie howled, clutching the podium and refusing to let go. “I won’t stand for it! Absolutely not!”

Julius stood directly behind her, eyes bloodshot. “Leon, we’re friends, aren’t we? So take us along!”

“Since when were *we* friends?!”

“Since now!”

“Shut up and get out!”

Julius wasn't the only one digging his heels in.

"Leon," Jilk said, "we are your subordinates. Isn't it a bit cold of you to dismiss our assistance?"

"Did it never occur to you that the reason I didn't get your 'assistance' was because I don't want you to come? Get the hell out!"

Brad pushed Jilk aside. "But this is my time to shine, isn't it? My ability to manipulate magic makes me essential for this mission. No need to be shy. Promise you'll take me along!"

"I don't need you! Go home and take a good long look at yourself while you're at it!"

"C'mon, Leon, you gotta take *me*." Greg elbowed Brad out of his way. "These guys are amateurs, but I've got tons of experience doin' this kinda thing. You just *gotta* take me along. I won't let you down!"

"Go home, meathead."

"Heh heh, you're complimenting me, huh? That means I'm a shoo-in."

"Sorry, I take it back. Just *go home*."

Leon was gradually losing his energy to fight.

Greg posed in front of Leon, trying to show off his muscles, only to receive a swift kick from Chris, who was the next to plead his case. "Leon, I *will* be useful to you, I swear. We sojourned together in the Alzer Republic, remember? We're a team! We share the same fate. We are comrades who trust each other with our very lives. Please, allow me to join you on this adventure—"

The moment Angie heard that word, she dashed forward, shoving Chris aside. "You're going on an *adventure*?!"

"Gweh?!" Chris cried as he went tumbling.

Angie lacked the wherewithal to care what happened to him.

Leon jerked back at the intensity of Angie's excitement. "Y-yeah. See, I was thinking of going treasure hunting, and I was going to use today to plan our trip."

When Angie took in their surroundings, she noticed the exquisitely detailed map that had been tacked onto the chalkboard. Marie and her boys had likely intruded while Leon was in the midst of setting up and had proceeded to make a nuisance of themselves.

Angie pushed closer, knocking Marie and Julius out of the way in the process. “And the fact that you invited me means you plan to let me participate, right?”

Their noses were only a hair’s breadth from touching. Both of their faces had turned red, but while Leon’s hue derived from embarrassment, Angie’s was pure eagerness.

Leon pulled back for space and cleared his throat. “Of course. I intended to tackle it together with you. I’ll be dragging out the *Einhorn* so we can travel to the floating island where this treasure is supposedly located.” He bumped his fist against the map behind him.

Angie approached the chalkboard, her gaze focused intently on the map. “That’s awfully detailed. Even the paper is brand new. Is this real?”

“Yep, no questions about that. Luxion made it.” Leon jerked his chin at his partner.

Angie followed his gaze. Luxion moved his red lens up and down, as if nodding. “That is correct. I took an old map and improved its overall appearance.”

“You really are capable of anything.” Duly impressed by his skill, Angie returned her attention to the map. “What’s this building? An old fortress?”

“An old, collapsed fortress’s *dungeon*!” Marie interjected. “There’ll be magic stones and *tons* of treasure. If we clear out all the stuff, our days of penniless pauperdom will be long gone! I won’t have to beg Big Br—err, Leon—for scraps anymore either!”

Marie’s excited spiel seemed to reignite the interest of Julius and his friends as well.

“That means Marie will be spending less time with Leon,” said Julius. “We find that treasure and we’re *guaranteed* to have more time with her. I’d be sick with myself if I didn’t participate in such an amazing opportunity!”

Marie and her posse spoke as if they were confident the treasure was already theirs. This infuriated Angie, but she ignored them in favor of pressing Leon for more details.

“I’m in,” she said. “So when are we doing this? When do we leave?”

Angie was so focused on the prospect of adventure that she completely forgot the awkwardness between them and grabbed Leon by the arms. She pulled him in and drew him into an embrace.

Leon flinched. “I called you here so we could decide on a date, but then these tagalongs showed up uninvited.” He shot a look at Jake and his group.

Jake folded his arms over his chest, smiled, and boldly declared, “I could hardly call myself a man of Holfortian nobility if I heard the promise of such heart-pounding adventure and refused to partake.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Eri, you’re coming along, aren’t you?”

Ah, so that’s it, Angie thought. He wants to show off his skills in front of the girl he likes. Hmph, what a disappointment. His adventuring spirit is simply insincere. Her impression of the second prince took an immediate nosedive.

Erin pressed her hands together. “If you will allow me the honor of participating, I would be delighted.”

“Heh heh, fear not. Duke Bartfort, we will be coming as well.”

Jake spoke as if his participation were guaranteed, but Leon shot him a cold look. “You guys are first-years. You’ll be useless out there. Your butt’s staying right here.”

“That’s right. Go home!” Julius barked at Jake. His four buddies joined in to jeer.

“What did you say?! A disinherited failure has no right to dictate my actions!” And then no-holds-barred sibling warfare broke out.

Leon sighed heavily. “Julius, you can scoot along home too, you know.”

“Leon, don’t be so cold! Didn’t we establish we’re friends?!”

“Knock it off! Don’t cling to my leg!”

The classroom erupted in noise once more, quieting only when Oscar opened his mouth to speak.

“Personally, I would like the opportunity to earn some savings for my future with Miss Jenna. I beg of you, Brother-in-Law, won’t you give me this opportunity to join you?”

Oscar posed the request so naturally, but everyone knew the more complex underpinnings of the love triangle beneath it. With bated breath, their gazes turned to Leon. This was a Bartfort family problem, so he had special right to make the call.

Oscar, seemingly oblivious to the new tension in the atmosphere, further pleaded, “I’ll be happy to do whatever you need, even basic chores, but please, I beg of you—give me this chance to become a man worthy of Miss Jenna!”

Leon pulled a face, conflicted by the earnest request. “I already think you’re plenty worthy of her. If anything, I feel bad seeing you as her partner. Please don’t lower your head. I understand where you’re coming from. You can tag along.”

“Truly?! What a blessing, Prince Jake! It seems I can go.”

Jake went red in the face as he shouted back, “You should have been pleading for me—your *master*—to go!”

“What? Why’s that on me?” Oscar tilted his head, genuinely confused, as if he couldn’t comprehend how he could be saddled with such a duty.

As chaos reignited in the classroom, Livia edged closer to Angie. “Um, Angie?”

Realizing that Livia was concerned for her, Angie gave her a hug. “Livia, an adventure! We’re going on an *adventure*! Not the kind we’ve been on before—I mean a *real* adventure. This may even be an unexplored dungeon.” Her eyes were downright sparkling. “You’re going to go too, aren’t you? Aren’t you?!”

Livia’s face contorted, but she nodded.

Chapter 4:

The Nature of the Kingdom's Aristocracy

ALTHOUGH THE *EINHORN* had originally been built just before I went to study abroad in the republic, it was widely regarded as my personal ship. Its distinctive single horn split the air as it zoomed forward, soaring through the sky. Powerful gusts of wind buffeted Livia as she wandered out onto the ship's desk. She tamped down her hair with her hands as she approached me.

"Mr. Leon, what magic did you cast?"

"Magic?"

"I mean on Angie! Only days ago, she was utterly depressed—she was worried you hated her. Then yesterday, she couldn't sleep a wink because she was so excited for us to set off."

Angie had gone full throttle on her adventuring instinct once before, when we visited the elves' village. It wasn't like she'd lost her intense admiration for her ancestors. Or maybe it was adventure itself that so enthralled her. All Holfortian aristocrats revered adventurers for their forays into unexplored territory and the treasure they claimed.

"I haven't used magic—or any kind of trick. I just really wanted to go on an adventure with Angie."

Livia eyed me as if she didn't entirely buy it, but as Angie was in such a good mood, she let it slide. "There really is treasure, right?"

"There is—or rather, there should be. Assuming no one else has found it first."

"I'm more interested in the ruins themselves."

Since Livia had grown up a commoner, her view of adventurers was less romantic; she saw them as people who scrounged up magic stones, end of story. As such, she was more intrigued by the remnants of old civilizations than the treasures they contained.

“You’ll definitely get your fill on that end. You’ll see a whole ancient fortress.”

“You say it as though you’ve already seen it.” Again, she scrutinized me.

I put a hand to my chest. “To tell the truth, I saw a bunch of different places when I found Luxion. We’re going back to one of the islands I stumbled on before.”

“Really?” Her gaze wandered to Luxion.

“Yes,” he said. “I created the map based on the data we gathered then. While I cannot guarantee the existence of treasure within, I believe the chances are significantly high.”

“In that case, I’m excited. It looks like Angie won’t have any reason to be disappointed.”

It sometimes felt a bit odd to see Livia fuss over Angie. They were enemies in the otome game. Instead, they had become the best of friends. Life threw some serious curveballs, as it turned out.

Livia glanced at me. “Thank you, Mr. Leon.”

“For what?”

“For doing this for Angie. I couldn’t have brought her so much joy. She really does need you.” Livia tore her gaze away and clutched onto the near railing, gazing out at the open sky.

“I dunno about that,” I said. “I don’t think she needs me at all.”

“Huh?”

“What I mean is, I need you guys more than you need me. That goes for you too.” Livia opened her mouth to press me further, but I was so flustered by my own words that I blurted, “Luxion, it’s gotten cold out here. Let’s go inside.”

“Yes, Master.”

“You should get back inside soon too, Livia.”

I sped away, intending to leave, but Livia called after me.

“Mr. Leon, say that again! Just one more time!”

“It’s too embarrassing! I can’t!”

The imperial knight Finn was seated in the *Einhorn*’s dining hall, lost in silent contemplation. Brave floated in the air beside him, while Mia sat nearby, sipping her drink through a straw. She seemed to be enjoying her time on board.

“I never dreamed that I’d go on an adventure like this, Sir Knight.”

“Hm? I guess not.”

“Something on your mind?” Mia asked.

“No, nothing serious.” Finn sighed deeply as he reminded himself of the purpose of this trip. Leon had invited him along because it pertained to Mia’s illness and their quest to cure it.

Originally, Finn and Brave had considered proceeding along the course set by the third game’s narrative, thereby triggering Mia’s awakening. They’d thought this would cure her mysterious sickness. However, it was entirely possible that if she awakened, her condition would worsen. After all, the strangest part of all of this was that Mia had never suffered from any debilitating illness in the game. Instead, Erica was beset by that misfortune.

Anyway, Leon and I agreed that if she and I came along this time and her condition worsened, it would signify that the awakening would endanger her health. But... Finn tilted his head and studied Mia. She didn’t seem to be any worse off than usual, at least outwardly. *I guess she’s fine, for now.* He was deeply relieved.

“Don’t worry.” Finn flashed a smile at Mia. “The thing I was puzzling over is—uh, hm...ah, yes! I was puzzling over why Holfort’s nobility is so hung up on adventurers.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Everybody’s acting super different.” Mia looked from Finn to the rest of the crew. She spotted Julius and Jake in the process, along with Erin, who had come along at the younger prince’s insistence.

Julius was complaining about Jake’s outfit.

“Do you seriously plan to participate in such slovenly attire? You’ll shame the royal family. Stay inside the ship and wait for us.”

This only inspired Jake to do a spin so he could show off his beloved new adventuring outfit.

“This is all the rage right now, Brother. I suppose you’re behind the times—outdated, even. Perhaps *you* should stay here and enjoy your tea. Never fear; Eri and I will take home the treasure.”

Erin forced a smile as she pacified the prince. “Your Highness, you shouldn’t speak that way to your older brother.”

“I told you not to call me that, didn’t I, Eri? More to the point, your equipment looks so old.”

Though a woman, Erin was significantly taller than the prince, and the armor she wore had seen repeated use. “I’ve used it for many years, and I’ve grown attached,” she confessed.

“It suits you perfectly.”

As the ridiculously romantic display unfolded, all the emotion drained from Julius’s face. He slammed his foot into his brother’s back. The younger prince crashed to the ground, where he flipped over and glared up at Julius.

“What was that for?!”

“Sorry. You just pissed me off.”

“Jealousy, is it? Hmph, you are so petty,” Jake needled as he clambered to his feet.

Julius glared at Jake, a wrinkle forming in his brow.

The way those two glower at one another is pure shonen manga, Finn thought, glancing at the other tables. The rest of the kingdom’s nobility were in high spirits.

“Behold! I bought brand-new equipment for this trip.” Brad was unveiling his gaudy armor set.

Greg—nude to the waist—pulled a face behind him. “The only armor a man

needs is his own physique. You should be working out! Gotta beef up!”

Chris performed maintenance on his sword while he watched, but he couldn't contain his annoyance at Greg's descent into muscle-mania. “Excessive muscles only impede joint manipulation. Rather than waste time with all this, you should be ensuring your weapons are properly maintained. They won't do you much good if they've fallen to pieces when you need them.” The edges of Chris's lips curled, his attention unwaveringly focused on his blade's upkeep.

Are these guys really the love interests from the first game? Finn thought. I expected them to be more noble. Dignified.

Lastly, his gaze wandered to Jilk, who was busy cleaning his weapon. A number of bombs were laid out in front of him. “Heh heh heh, I'll be the one to conquer this dungeon.”

Although this was supposed to be a time of cooperation, he was scheming about how to come out ahead.

Could this be Leon's fault? Did his involvement somehow warp their personalities?

Finn could only speculate.

“What's our objective?!” Marie's voice boomed inside the *Einhorn's* hangar. She had donned a set of armor as she stood before a similarly equipped Carla.

“To get our hands on that treasure and become fully financially independent!” Carla answered.

Kyle was standing beside her, able to join the two girls for the first time in a while. “Self-reliance! What a wonderful word, Mistress!”

Tears trickled down Marie's face. “Yes, it truly is. Once we get our hands on that treasure, we can finally strike out on our own. We won't have to bow our heads to anyone. We'll be able to enjoy our stress-free lives, and we'll accomplish it all on our own!”

Providing for her five dum-dums, with all their excessive spending, required no small amount of backbreaking labor. Marie hoped that whatever treasure

they managed to discover here would lead to such profits that she wouldn't have to rely on Leon for an allowance. Her newfound motivation to achieve independence was partly founded in Erica.

It's too embarrassing and pathetic to keep leaning on Big Bro while my daughter's watching! For her sake, I've got to reclaim my dignity.

She had never wanted anything so much in her life.

Meanwhile, Noelle and Erica visited the guest room Angie and Livia were using for the trip. Angie was busy performing maintenance on her gun while Noelle looked on, already at her limit.

"All he said was 'adventure,' and everyone went bonkers. Angie's like a totally different person."

Angie lifted the rifle she was working on and pulled the trigger. Since the cartridge was empty, it only let off a hollow metal *clunk* that echoed through the room.

"That just ought to show you how promising this adventure is," she said.

Since Angie was still fully devoted to inspecting every last piece of equipment, Erica stepped in to illuminate. "While I'm sure it must be difficult for you to grasp what we seem to be feeling, Miss Noelle, Holfort was founded by adventurers."

"Yeah, so I've heard. But aren't you guys a little too stoked about all this?"

"You could say it's something of a grudge, one that has been handed down through the generations. A deep-seated, impassioned desire to triumph over our original homeland."

"And that means...?"

"If you trace the majority of Holfortian lineages all the way to their origin, you'll find their ancestors hail from the Holy Kingdom of Rachel. In Rachel, adventurers stand at the bottom rung of society. I suspect that is what fuels our competitive thirst."

"Huh." Noelle more or less let the whole story go in one ear and out the

other. She didn't really follow.

Having finished her inspection, Angie glanced at the two girls. "Holfort and Rachel have been plagued by bad blood since before our founding. Those caught up in Rachel's political upheaval were driven out and forced to seek refuge. That's when they found and claimed the land we now know as Holfort."

"Guess this whole thing goes way back. And isn't that the same country that's put a huge bounty on Leon?"

Angie frowned, not the least bit pleased to be reminded of that. "As far as they're concerned, we stand eternally beneath them. It seems they're reluctant to accept the fact that the tables have turned."

Noelle chose not to continue pursuing the subject. Angie's feelings toward the Holy Kingdom of Rachel were palpably bitter. "Well, I understand a bit better now," she said, "but I still think you guys are weirdly pumped up. It's hard to believe that an old grudge would get you all so heated."

Angie giggled, lips spread in a wide grin. "Well, it's positively *thrilling*. It gets the blood pumping, the heart pounding—would that be a better way to describe it? Being a successful adventurer was a dream of mine. I'm grateful to Leon."

Grateful, she said, and yet her smile looked somehow forlorn.

When the *Einhorn* arrived at our destination, we located a clearing and forced the ship down low. Since we couldn't fully land, we hovered, using anchors in the form of long chains with stakes driven into the ground.

While Julius and the other boys piloted their Armors, lowering luggage from the ship, I was on the ground with a rifle in hand, keeping a watchful eye on our surroundings.

"The more I think about it, the stranger I find this island," I muttered as I lowered my rifle to get a good look around through my binoculars.

Livia and Angie were standing nearby. Like me, Angie had a rifle in hand and was keeping vigilant. "What bothers you about this place?" she asked.

“I mean, there’s an ancient fortress in the middle of the island, right? Not surprising to see it overrun by a forest now, but I don’t understand why there’s no harbor.”

Assuming someone had once lived on this island, it seemed awfully inconvenient not to have a place to, you know, land. The only things around were the old fortress and the surrounding woods. If this were a video game, I wouldn’t have thought much of it, but there was something unnatural about seeing it in real life. It was hard to believe anyone had ever actually used this place.

Livia held the map in her hands, studying it to locate our coordinates and the distance from the fortress proper. “Perhaps the edges of the island collapsed and it’s smaller than it was originally,” she offered. “It wouldn’t be odd to assume it was once much larger and that it’s merely lost its harbor.”

Huh. Could that be it? I lowered my binoculars.

“Or perhaps this was part of a larger continent that was broken off and stolen,” Angie said.

Either hypothesis did make sense. With so many possibilities to explain the absence, I put the anomaly out of my mind. More important than this island’s history was whatever treasure lay within the old fortress.

“I’ve got no idea what happened here, but I guess it doesn’t really matter if we’re just looking for treasure,” I said.

Angie rested the rifle on her shoulder. “Exactly. Once we’ve claimed the treasure, we can send an investigative team.” The “T” word had her in high spirits.

Livia sighed as she folded the map. “Well, I *do* want to know this island’s history. But for the moment, do we even know its name? It would be nice if we knew what they’d called the fortress as well.”

I paused to think back, searching through my memories of the game. “Pretty sure it was something like the ‘Fortress of the Golden Hands.’”

That night we made camp at the edge of the forest and gathered around the campfire to chat. We chopped down a tree to use as a log bench, which we sat on as we enjoyed our drinks in metal cups. A curtain of darkness hung over the sky, studded with a vast array of stars.

The only downside of what was an otherwise enjoyable experience was all the monster snarling that trickled out from the surrounding trees. Really put a damper on the mood. The snap and crackle of the fire provided an ever-present rhythm of its own.

Noelle sat beside me. She bent to sip on her piping-hot drink only to jerk back the moment the liquid touched her mouth. Desperate to cool it, she blew. While I gazed at her, Jilk and a few others pulled out some instruments.

“Since we’ll be venturing into the old fortress tomorrow, we should at least enjoy ourselves today, yes?” No sooner did Jilk say that than he began playing what resembled a guitar.

Noelle studied him for a moment. “Everyone seems to be having fun, even though things are going to get rough tomorrow.”

“They really don’t how to read the room, do they?” I shook my head. “Textbook tagalongs.”

Noelle laughed. “You can’t read a room either.”

I opened my mouth to protest—only to catch a glimpse of Luxion’s red lens staring me down, joined by Cleare’s blue. They were watching me like hawks, ready to pounce. The prudent course was to avoid opening myself up to remarks, so I reached for a new subject.

“Anyway, I’m sure they’ll be fine,” I said.

“But this is an old fortress that no one’s ever been in, right? Oh, wait. I guess if it’s a fortress, that means *someone* was in it, huh?”

“According to Luxion and Cleare, not for several centuries. That’s why Angie and Livia are so enthusiastic.” I glanced at the other side of the campfire, where Angie was gushing to Livia.

“We’re definitely going to find treasure tomorrow,” she said. “You’ll help out

too, won't you, Livia?"

"Huh? We're all going in together, aren't we?"

"Livia, honestly. These aren't our comrades, they're our rivals. This time, even Leon is our enemy." There was a spark of defiance in Angie's eyes when she looked at me.

Oh, cut me some slack! This whole treasure-hunting thing is supposed to be so we can make up.

"I'd like to hunt with you guys," I said.

"No," Angie insisted. "I'm taking Livia and Noelle. And *we're* finding the treasure."

Noelle jumped. "Huh? I'm going with you two?!"

It sounded like news to her.

"It'll be more fun if we do it together, don't you think?" Livia asked with a strained smile.

Unfortunately, Angie refused to relent. "No. Not this time." She huffed and turned the other cheek.

This was a completely different attitude from the one in the classroom, or even the one on our date. It was like she *wanted* distance.

"Did I do something to make her angry?" I asked, confused.

Erica approached as the question left my mouth. Since the night air was chilly, she was wearing a coat. "What's the problem? Let Miss Angelica and the others do as they will."

"You sure about that, Eri—err, ahem, Princess Erica?" Flustered, I hurriedly corrected myself so it didn't sound like I was being too chummy with Her Highness.

Erica leaned in close, until her lips were just by my ear. "I told you, didn't I, Uncle? What she wants is for you to recognize her strength."

"Oh, so *that's* what this is about. Guess I should give in."

This treasure-hunting trip was my attempt to bridge the gap between Angie

and me. If her objective was to find the treasure first, it was therefore better to concede.

Erica pulled a face, annoyed.

“What? Is that wrong?”

“That should go without saying. She’s not the type to be satisfied with a pulled punch.”

At some point, while we were whispering, Angie, Livia, and even Noelle had started to send cold looks our way.

I let out a strangled yelp, but Erica didn’t look the least bit surprised. She just said, “There’s no need for you to be so on guard. I have no intention of taking Duke Bartfort from any of you.”

I doubted they would take her at her word.

“While you may not be interested in taking him, Princess, Her Majesty seems to have different ideas,” Angie said. “She’ll carry out whatever plan she deems best with little consideration for those in her way.”

As much as I wanted to insist Miss Mylene wouldn’t do such a thing, that was bound to upset Angie further, so I shut my mouth. The atmosphere had nevertheless grown suffocating.

Erica frowned. “My mother is part of the royal family. She can only do what’s best for the country. However, I am already engaged.”

My eyes widened. “No way!”

Not far from where we were sitting, Marie shot up from her seat and dropped her cup. “Erica!” Her voice hitched. “Um, Your Highness—you’re engaged?”

Just beside her, Julius was dumbstruck by Marie’s surprise. “Of course,” he said. “Erica has been engaged to the heir of House Frazer for quite some time.”

“No one said a word to me about that!”

“Well, uh, I didn’t really think it was my place.”

“That’s not what I mean!”

The other boys were similarly puzzled by Marie’s shaken reaction to this

news.

Angie glared at Marie. "What are you so surprised for? Her Highness is a princess. An engagement is hardly strange, now that she's come of age."

To Angie and everyone else from this world, this was common sense. It was the way things worked.

Marie lowered her eyes. "But that's awful." She slumped back into her seat. Carla and Kyle hurried to her side, offering her a new cup.

I shared her displeasure, my lips pulled into a taut line. "So it's a political union?"

Erica nodded, but she didn't look upset. She glanced at Marie with all the kindness of an exasperated parent. "I will marry into House Frazer for a number of reasons. I am not particularly displeased with the union."

"But shouldn't you be? Don't you like someone? I mean, I'd be happy to help you out, if so." As Erica's uncle, it was my duty to put a stop to it if she was being forced.

Angie seized my arm. "Knock it off. Besides, the rumors say she and Elijah are on good terms."

"Elijah? Is that the name of the guy she's gonna marry?"

"His full name is Elijah Rapha Frazer. He's the heir to a marquessate who've been tasked with defense of our border with Rachel."

My face scrunched.

Erica giggled. "It's all right. I truly am fine with it."

"You are?"

Erica placed her left hand over her chest. "Yes. Because I am a princess of this kingdom."

"And that alone makes this fine?" I couldn't comprehend how she could laugh and smile about it.

Erica seemed to sense that I wasn't entirely convinced, but she showed no intention of letting us drag this out. "We can discuss this some other time, yes?"

It's getting late. Shouldn't we retire? After all, you'll all be busy tomorrow."

At her prompting, we decided to call it a night and head to bed.

When I crawled out of my tent the following morning, I found Hering and Mia already awake. Specifically, Hering was practicing with his sword while Mia watched.

"Sir Knight, the duke has awoken."

Hering was naked from the waist up as he swung his sword in the same basic motion. When Mia called out, he took a towel from her and dabbed at his sweat before making his way over.

"You're up awfully early," he said.

"You train first thing in the morning?" I asked.

"Every day, yes."

During that short exchange, I noticed Mia had begun preparing our breakfast. I scratched my head. "You don't have to go to all that trouble, y'know. You guys are guests."

Mia hurried over to me and clasped her hands together as she stared straight into my eyes. "No, please allow me to help! I want to participate in this adventure too!"

"Uh, you do?" I glanced at Hering and Brave, both of whom shook their heads.

"Mia loves this kind of stuff," Hering explained.

Brave agreed. "Yep, she's a real tomboy."

Mia's cheeks swelled in frustration. "What's wrong with that? I want to go on an adventure and find treasure just like everyone else! And...and as long as I'm with Sir Knight, nothing scares me." Her gaze dropped and her cheeks flushed bright red. When she finally looked up, her misty eyes fixed straight on Hering.

Hering smiled at her. "So long as I'm here, nothing and no one will so much as lay a scratch on my princess."

"Mia, what about me?" Brave butted in, sulking. "I'm here too, you know."

“Oh,” she gasped. “Yes, of course! I’m relying on you too, Bravey.”

“Didn’t I tell you to stop with the whole ‘Bravey’ thing?”

These guys sure were energetic in the morning.

After wrapping up the necessary preparations, we trekked through the forest and arrived at the collapsed outer wall of the fortress. It had probably once been an impressive sight, impenetrable to all would-be invaders. Alas, it was mostly ruins now, and overrun by ivy. It didn’t look liable to serve its original purpose anymore.

I studied the ground below us. “The cobblestone’s still visible here. Wonder if this was the original gate.”

Greg waltzed up, holding a spear. It was shorter than his usual weapon; he’d clearly anticipated fighting in the tight confines of the fortress. “This place is bigger than I thought it’d be. You said it was squirreled away on a tiny island, so I figured there’d be a big tower and nothing else.”

Luxion’s eye glowed as he said, “Master, I have confirmed the presence of underground rooms beneath the fortress. It seems to be an entire labyrinth.”

“Are there any enemies?”

“I detect a vast array of monsters. A number of them are quite powerful, but none so great that they are beyond our powers.”

Then this place was exactly how it was in the game. I’d cleared this particular dungeon numerous times before reincarnating. The Fortress of the Golden Hands held innumerable treasures in its depths. I always cleaned it out early in my playthrough so I wouldn’t have to worry about money for the rest of the run. The only problem was the sheer number of enemies waiting inside.

I’m also maybe a little terrified of those things in particular...

As I stood motionless at the front entrance, Angie strode forward, Livia and Noelle close behind her. She intended to enter ahead of me. As they passed, Livia shot me a troubled smile. Noelle shrugged, but she seemed to have every intention of keeping up with Angie.

“Angie,” I called.

She froze and glanced over her shoulder. “What? There’s no point in trying to stop me.”

“Take Cleare with you.”

The robot in question drifted in the direction of the girls while grumbling, “Honestly, Master, you really put us AI through the wringer. Let’s do this, girls.”

Angie glared at me. “No need. The three of us can do this alone.”

“I’ve got Luxion here, so you take her.” I reached out and grabbed my robot buddy to emphasize the point. “That makes this fair, right?”

Angie gaped for a moment. “You...”

If she was so intent on making this a real competition, I was going to take her up on it. And if she didn’t want me holding back? I wouldn’t.

“You can give her back to me, if you want. That way you’ll have an excuse when you lose. What’ll it be?” I snickered, purposefully provoking her.

Angie scowled, but soon enough, that scowl transformed into a daring grin. “You’ll regret your generosity soon enough. I’m looking forward to what manner of excuse *you* come up with when you lose.”

Noelle pressed a hand to her head and looked up at the sky. “You guys seem to be having so much fun! Wish I could say the same.”

“Yes, they’re both rather animated, aren’t they?” Livia giggled.

Having said her piece, Angie marched off with Livia and Noelle on her heels. Cleare zipped forward to keep up. “Wait for me, girls!”

I watched them go and breathed a small sigh.

Marie was the next to dash forward, followed by two figures. “Kyle, Carla!” she called over her shoulder. “We’re going to claim all that treasure for ourselves!”

Kyle and Carla wore looks of grim resolve as they chased after her.

“Yes, Mistress!”

“Let’s give this all we have, Lady Marie!”

They disappeared inside. Brad stared after them. “Huh? What about us?” he squeaked in disbelief.

He and the rest of Team Nitwit could scarcely believe Marie had left them behind. They stood there, petrified. I actually felt a teensy-weensy little bit sorry for them.

Ignoring the plight of his older brother, Jake and company prepared to head in.

“Eri, Oscar! It’s time to start scoping this place out. We’re going to find whatever treasure awaits inside and use it show the upper crust that I have what it takes to rule.”

“Yes, Prince Jake!” Erin responded eagerly, hurrying after him. In contrast to her adorable appearance, her equipment was all scuffed and worn. Admittedly, it did give her the look of a seasoned adventurer.

Oscar waved to me as he went with them, smiling blithely. “Off I go, Brother-in-Law!”

His displays of innocence made me feel all the worse, knowing that my older sister had him in her clutches. That was why, at the very least, I had to say: “Don’t get injured in there.”

With everyone else gone, I turned to Hering and his team. “What’re you guys gonna do?”

Hering glanced at Mia and Erica. His shoulders slumped. “Since I am tasked with the duty of protecting the two princesses, we will take our time bringing up the rear.”

Mia frowned. “Oh, come on, Sir Knight. I want to find some treasure with you!”

Hering’s brows furrowed; he was likely trying to hold back in consideration of Mia’s health, but Mia was as eager to join the hunt as everyone else.

“All of those forging ahead have trained into hardened adventurers. We would only get in their way,” Erica said, trying to placate Mia.

“Aww, I guess. If you say so, Princess Erica.”

“In that case, I’ll leave protecting these two to you,” I said. “Her Highness is incredibly important, so you’d better make sure nothing happens to her—or else.”

Hering lifted a brow. “Oh? Then I question your decision to bring her here in the first place.”

Well, I guess he does have a point there.

Chapter 5:

Fortress of the Golden Hands

MEANWHILE, back at Holfort's royal palace, Roland was shocked to learn his beloved daughter had joined Leon and his entourage to venture into a dungeon.

"Who said Erica could go?!" he demanded.

Although both of Roland's sons had gone as well, he singled her out. There was an obvious discrepancy between his treatment of his children. It just went to show that his love of Erica was profound.

Mylene sighed, thoroughly disgusted with her husband. She had brought him this news. "Erica requested leave to join them," she explained, hands on her hips, "as a way to deepen her relationship with Duke Bartfort. She's putting her best foot forward for the sake of our nation, yet here you are, bemoaning her proactive participation. Have you no shame?"

"She's frail!" Roland barked.

Mylene was worried about her daughter as well, knowing how sickly she had once been. But she was with *Leon*.

"I already spoke with Duke Bartfort regarding her condition. He said he would take up the task of looking into a cure for her illness." Mylene had agreed to Erica's departure in part because she hoped Leon would make good on that promise—that they would find a way to improve Erica's health.

For a split second, Roland's lips cracked into a smile. He, too, was swept up in a vision of Erica's improved condition. The moment he remembered Leon was with her, however, his expression soured. "I can't handle that brat hanging around her! Just thinking about it gives me the chills!" He thrashed about like a child throwing a tantrum.

Mylene left the king with a cold, admonishing look.

The outer walls weren't the only part of the Fortress of the Golden Hands that had fallen to ruin. What must once have been exquisite carpets had frayed almost beyond recognition. Suits of armor that had lined the corridors had rusted and crumbled in place. The paintings on the walls were faded and covered in a thick layer of dust.

Holes along the walls had probably at some point held windows, but the frames had crumbled and given way, leaving shards of glass scattered beneath them. A glance out one of these open holes revealed the inner courtyard, with its dozens of overgrown trees. These same holes did at least provide an opening from which sunlight spilled into the otherwise dark corridors.

I sighed deeply as I walked down one such hallway. "Why are you guys tagging along with me?" I stopped suddenly and threw a glance over my shoulder, where I found Julius and the rest of the idiot brigade marching along behind me.

"Because Marie won't depend on us," Julius said in frustration, fists trembling at his sides. "We figure we won't be able to win her trust back unless we find the treasure and offer it to her."

"And that's why you're following me? Why don't you guys look yourselves?"

"You may be underhanded, but you're exceptionally capable. Besides, since you have Luxion, you're basically our shortcut, you see?" Julius puffed his chest out, confident in his deduction.

"I will provide only the bare minimum of support," Luxion said coldly.

"Wha?!"

"Surely that comes as no surprise. This is a competition between Master and Angelica. I have advised Cleare to do the same to keep the conditions as fair as possible."

Jilk shook his head. "I can't believe what I'm hearing. Refusing to use any and all power at your disposal is pure arrogance. It's clearly better to pursue your goal with everything you have."

They were definitely just trying to get me on board so they could use me. I turned back around and headed off. "No thanks. Angie's more important to me

than you guys.”

A pair of voices echoed behind me.

“For claiming she’s so important, he spends an awful lot of time with other women, doesn’t he? Or is that my imagination?” Chris asked.

“That’s just how it goes,” said Greg. “Leon’s a guy.”

“Besides, he can’t hope to be convincing when he’s engaged to several other women.”

“Completely agree.”

These guys were really starting to get on my nerves.

I halted and whipped around, lifting my rifle to take aim. My finger hovered over the trigger. Chris and Greg assumed I meant to shoot them and jerked away.

“Everyone, get down!” I shouted.

Chris and Greg ducked and chanced a look over their shoulders.

It appeared from the dark depths of the corridor: a skeleton clad in rusted armor.

Real talk, this was one of the major reasons I’d avoided the fortress. The majority of its monsters were undead.

I pulled the trigger, firing a round that pierced the creature’s armor. It showed no signs of stopping, even after that direct hit. Little surprise there; it wasn’t exactly alive. Undead were pretty resistant to physical attacks too. And since these things regenerated unless totally pulverized, guns weren’t the ideal weapons for dealing with them.

Despite that, the skeleton I attacked began to decay, starting from the location of its bullet wound. With a violent tremble, its body crumbled.

“These holy bullets work wonders.”

Both the creature and its armor soon disappeared, leaving only a diminishing pillar of sand in its wake.

“You successfully subjugated the enemy, Master.” Luxion studied the

remnants. “It seems my initial assessment was correct; nothing in this dungeon poses any significant danger.”

Pretty confident of him to make that call after all of one battle.

Brad wiped away the cold sweat on his forehead. “I was sure you meant to threaten Chris and Greg.”

“You seriously think I’d point a gun at them for that?” Even I wasn’t that much of an ass.

Julius stared at the spot where the creature had once stood, quietly contemplating. “You told us that this place is infested with undead. Does that mean this fortress is cursed?”

I lifted a brow. “What do you mean by that?”

“Haven’t you heard? Places saturated with strong emotions like hate and resentment tend to produce more undead monsters.”

Well, crap. Now I’m gonna be even twitchier.

“Don’t bring up that kind of stuff,” I snapped before turning around and picking up the pace.

“Oh?” Jilk hummed under his breath. “Could it be that you lack the nerve for scary stories, Leon? If that is so, I have a special tale for you. I do hope you’ll listen. You see, it all started when—”

“Shut the hell up and keep an eye out, you conniving weasel!”

The chump squad burst into laughter.

Screw you guys! I’m only a little scared of these kinds of things. Only a little!

“In here!” Marie kicked down a decaying wooden door and burst into the room to find a number of undead within. Their silhouettes were human adjacent, but their skin and meat were rotting. Essentially, these things were zombies.

The moment the zombies spotted Marie and her comrades, they charged, groaning as they thrust their arms mindlessly in front of them.

Marie lifted her right hand, unleashing magic from her palm. “Get lost.” Her holy magic disintegrated the zombies in an instant. The attack was so effective that Kyle was left gawking.

“My lady, you’ve grown even more powerful.”

“My magic happens to be perfect for taking out the monsters in this dungeon,” Marie said. “No matter what comes at us, I’ll protect you, so don’t worry.”

As she spoke, Carla rummaged through the room. “Lady Marie!” she gasped. She had located a tattered old pouch with ten coins inside. “These silver coins seem quite ancient, but they’ll fetch a respectable price on the market.”

Marie shook her head. “No good. That’s nowhere near enough. Come on, you two, let’s go deeper. There has to be even better treasure lurking somewhere in this fortress.”

She spoke those words with such certainty that even as they nodded, Kyle and Carla were a touch bewildered.

Just to be sure, Marie searched the room on the off chance there might be some other undiscovered treasure inside. All the while, she combed through the memories of her past life for information about this place.

When I played, I know I came here a number of times. But it’s been so long that I hardly remember. Come on, brain, get it together! I need to do this to show Erica that I can be a proper mom—and to finally break free of financial dependence on Big Bro!

“Take this!” Oscar wielded a two-handed battle axe, which he brought crashing down on one of the armored skeletons. The creature was split in two thanks to the immense strength of his heavily muscled body.

However...

“Mr. Oscar, please get back!” Panicked, Erin managed to yank him back in time, sending him stumbling to the ground.

The skeleton’s broken bones knitted back together. It resumed swinging at

them with its sword almost immediately.

Oscar's jaw dropped. "What incredible regenerative ability!"

Jake gave his foster brother a swift smack on the back of the head. "How many times do I have to tell you? Don't use physical attacks against undead monsters—they don't work!"

Although the creature had indeed regenerated, Erin dispatched it with her shortsword. It was a blessed silver blade; an inscription carved into the metal bestowed it with holy power. Whenever she slashed one of the skeletons, the creature's wound rapidly decayed until every one of its bones crumbled to dust.

Having finished her work, Erin smoothly slid her blade back into its sheath. She then turned to her companions. "You stupid idiot! How many times do you have to make the same mistake before you're satisfied? Huh?!" she roared at Oscar. A wrinkle split her brow, and her voice trembled with unbridled fury. Her hands lashed out, snatching Oscar by the shirt collar. She hauled him up and pressed her face close. "Is your head just for decoration? Does it serve a purpose, or is there nothing but dust bunnies between those ears?"

"N-no, it serves a purpose!"

"If that's true, then prove it, you brainless meathead! Your axe has no effect on these undead. I told you use to use special, magically imbued bullets, didn't I? Or have you forgotten that the duke went out of his way to buy a ridiculous number of those, expensive as they are?!" Erin smacked him across the face several times.

Oscar was absolutely terrified.

"Eri," Jake interrupted.

Erin blanched, having completely forgotten about his presence. She stammered, "Y-Your Highness, I..." She curled in on herself, ashamed.

Jake walked over and took her hand in his. "I apologize for my foster brother. He's an idiot, so no matter how many times you tell him something, he still doesn't seem to get it."

"N-no. I'm the one who should be apologizing for behaving in such an

unsightly manner.”

“It was unexpected,” he admitted, “but now I know you have a bold side as well. I’m happy to have had the opportunity to get to know you even better.”

“Oh, Your Highness...”

“Enough of the ‘Your Highness’ nonsense. How many times are you going to repeat *that* mistake?”

“Aw, you big meanie.” Erin squeezed his hands.

They smiled blissfully at one another as if they had no other cares in the world.

Oscar watched vacantly and muttered, “This is exactly what Miss Finley warned me about. Love is seriously blind, I guess.”

Around that time, Angie, Livia, and Noelle, led by Cleare, found the entrance to the underground section of the fortress. A locked wooden door stood in their way, but the lock was rusted and worn.

Angie lifted her rifle. “Stay back, you two.” She fired a shot at the keyhole, and the door cracked open, granting them access to the area beyond. With practiced hands, she ejected the empty shell casing before reaching for the lantern at her hip. She raised it high to illuminate their way. Since it was powered by a magic stone, it shone brighter than an ordinary flashlight.

With her lantern to guide her, Angie fearlessly started forward—only for Noelle to seize her arm. “Hold on a sec. Aren’t you being a little too hasty? Let’s be a bit more cautious.”

Angie glanced back and sighed. “If we waste time dawdling, Leon will find the treasure before we do—or even someone else.”

“Okay, sure, but there are monsters all over the place. We need to make sure it’s safe to proceed.”

“A non-issue. Cleare is scanning the area for enemies.”

At the mention of her name, Cleare’s blue lens brightened, fully illuminating

the darkened corridor. She seemed to know the entire layout of the dungeon.

“I wouldn’t call any of the monsters here a real threat,” said Cleare. “But it doesn’t seem like all the paths in the underground connect.”

The sprawling dungeon below the fortress wasn’t a single unified structure; the divided areas made it even more complex.

“If we picked a dud, we’ll be wasting time. However, we don’t have the luxury to search for other entrances,” Angie said thoughtfully. She seemed oddly impatient.

“Why the rush?” Noelle asked.

Angie’s eyes narrowed. “It seems you don’t truly understand. Our opponent is *Leon*.”

“No, I get that.” Noelle was well aware of Leon’s prowess, when push came to shove. Even so, her perception of him was evidently a world away from Angie’s.

“When he was only fifteen, he set out on an incredible adventure all by himself and claimed a Lost Item,” Angie said. “It would be shocking enough that he managed that feat at such a young age, but it’s even more so that he did it without help. He’s a hero.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard all about that. He found Luxion, right?”

“No, you really don’t comprehend! You don’t realize just how awe-inspiring he is! Allow me to enlighten you.” Angie started walking as she listed Leon’s heroic exploits.

Noelle’s lips curled nigh imperceptibly as she studied Angie’s back and listened. *So I was wrong. She doesn’t hate him, does she? Guess that’s...not a shame, is it?*



She was relieved to see Angie gleefully ramble on and on about Leon. Not that Noelle had been particularly worried about a split, even after their argument—but she *had* been concerned there would be a shift in the dynamic. Fortunately, this confirmed Angie’s perspective hadn’t really changed.

“People claim he only succeeded on that first adventure by miraculous luck, but they couldn’t be more misguided,” Angie said. “When we were first-years, we accompanied him to the village of the elves. There, he found a secret passage in their ruins and even got his hands on some more treasure.”

“Wow.” Noelle’s unenthused reply did nothing to discourage Angie; she went on and on, proudly touting Leon’s accomplishments.

“He discovered the Sacred Tree Sapling in the republic too, didn’t he? Does coincidence really strike three times? Even as an adventurer, he stands a head above the rest—a mighty hero.”

“You think very highly of him.”

“Of course. He has carved his name forever into the kingdom’s history! That’s why I worked so hard to be worthy of him. But unfortunately...” Angie’s voice gradually weakened, the vivacity of moments before sapped away.

Realizing Angie was sliding down the slope to self-deprecation, Noelle turned to Livia, who trailed behind them. She had been silent all this time.

“Oh, come on, Liv, say something,” Noelle urged in a low whisper.

Livia was busy examining a decoration she had picked up somewhere along their journey. Her eyes practically glowed as she studied the crest engraved on it. “Miss Noelle, please have a look at this! This, right here—this crest! This was used by a supposedly annihilated civilization. The piece is so worn that it’s hard to identify the shape precisely, but I think it may qualify as an unprecedented discovery.” She spoke wistfully as she lifted the fragment of who-knew-what in the air.

Noelle grimaced. “Uh, Liv, aren’t you at all concerned about Miss Angelica here?” Translation: *Aren’t you forgetting why we’re here in the first place?*

To her surprise, Livia’s response was a quick: “Everything will be all right.”

What part of this was “all right”?

Livia smiled, glancing at Angie’s back. “Those two needed to butt heads.”

“Seriously?”

Was this really going to work out? Anxiety welled up in Noelle.

“Don’t worry,” Livia cooed insistently.

Up ahead, Angie accidentally bumped into one of the decorations hanging on the wall, causing it to fall and shatter.

“Angie!” Livia screeched, racing ahead. “Did I or did I *not* tell you to do your utmost to avoid breaking anything here?!” She leaned in close, backing Angie into the wall.

“Y-you have it all wrong! I was merely lost in thought.” Angie looked flustered.

“You *promised* me you wouldn’t destroy anything. Didn’t you? I *told* you that each and every item we find here is a precious historical memento and that we *need* to do everything we can to preserve them. And you agreed! *Didn’t you?*”

“Livia, please forgive me!”

Noelle slapped a hand to her forehead as she watched. “Liv’s a real terror when you piss her off, huh...”

“What do you mean, ‘no problem’? There’s nothing *but* problems here!”

After finding the entrance to the underground dungeon and naively wandering right in, we’d suffered. Horrifically. I was hiding behind the corner of a corridor, loading fresh rounds into my rifle as I cursed Luxion up and down.

“You know your worst habit? Failing me at the worst possible times! Some AI you are. Don’t you feel any shame?!” I hollered at my partner. I had little choice other than to raise my voice; all around us, Julius and company were firing rounds at the enemy as well.

“It seems I must revisit my assessment of your abilities, Master. I didn’t expect you to struggle so terribly against such insignificant monsters. I truly thought you more capable. I do realize I overestimated you.” He moved his

body back and forth as if shaking his head at me.

Even Jilk was incensed. “While it is *flattering* to be thought of so highly, we would appreciate a more accurate assessment of the enemies’ capabilities!” he shot back as he lifted his rifle, peering through the scope before pulling the trigger.

His bullet blasted through the skull of a skeleton on the far end of the corridor. Unlike the undead we’d encountered upstairs, this one wore a robe and carried a bone staff, indicating he was some kind of spellcaster.

These magic-wielding undead had charged us in overwhelming numbers. The worst part? They had a number of skeletal warriors playing vanguard, clad in much thicker armor than the one upstairs. They carried enormous shields as well as battle axes, and much to my chagrin, those shields deflected ordinary bullets.

Jilk had taken aim and found an opening in their front line to take out a spellcaster in the back. The guy had a terrible personality, and was conniving and underhanded to boot, but he was an unrivaled sharpshooter.

Alas, the remaining spellcasters raised their staves.

“Everyone, get down!” Greg bellowed.

We dropped, taking cover as best we could. They launched a volley of magic in quick succession that triggered a number of explosions right on our heads. Flashes of light shot through the otherwise dark labyrinth, and particles of dust danced through the air in the wake of the onslaught.

As soon as the enemy’s magic offensive was over, I shouted orders. “Julius, advance! You’re our meat shield.”

“Excuse you. I *am* still a prince, you realize.”

“Pipe down and do as you’re told. Take a shield, use that barrier trick you’re so proud of, and do your best to block their attacks. Brad!”

Brad sneered. “Surely you don’t mean to tell me to charge?”

“Hardly. I have zero hope of you accomplishing literally anything in close combat.”

“You don’t have to be that harsh!”

I shook my head. “Whatever, just get ready to blow their front line wide open. I’m expecting you to launch your most powerful spells.” As soon as Brad nodded, I turned next to Jilk. “Keep sniping them like you have been. But no friendly fire.”

Jilk rolled his eyes. “As if I would make such an amateur mistake.”

“More like, I can’t assume you won’t intentionally put a bullet in an ally’s back.”

“What kind of man do you take me for?” Jilk snapped coldly, his usual calm nowhere to be seen. Despite his indignation, he focused up and reloaded his rifle.

Finally, I turned to Chris and Greg. “You two are going to charge the horde once Brad slams them with his magic.”

“We won’t let you down.” Chris adjusted his grip on his sword. “And what will you be doing?”

I shrugged. “I’m the leader, right? I’ll be hanging out and watching from behind, dishing out orders while you guys do all the work.”

Disgusted, Greg scolded me. “Only two kinds of people say something like that at a time like this: big shots and idiots.”

“I am afraid I must correct you,” Luxion said. “He is neither a big shot nor an idiot. He is an *incredible* idiot.”

“Enough from the peanut gallery,” I said. “You guys are gonna be my minions whether you like it or not.”

“Do you not think it an issue that such language demoralizes your subordinates?” Luxion asked.

“Nah, it’s whatever. These guys can handle it.”

I knew these five would have no problem mopping up the enemy—not just because I’d played the game and knew their character stats, but because, despite my best efforts, I had seen first-hand precisely how much they had grown.

Julius looked to me and grinned. As much as it annoyed me, I found myself asking, “What?”

“Nothing. I was only surprised to hear you think so highly of us. You aren’t honest with your feelings at all, Leon.”

Now I regret opening my mouth. And because I had, Julius was smirking like a triumphant fool, which only pissed me off more. I slammed my foot into his back.

“Hurry up and get out there!”

“D-dummy! Don’t shove me like that!”

Once I forced Julius out into the open, the spellcasters readied their next salvo of magical attacks. Julius scrambled to scoop up a shield and get into position.

“Tch, I’ll remember this, Leon!” he hollered. “Imperial Bulwark!” Light poured out of his shield, filling the corridor to create an enormous, semi-transparent barrier.

Thanks to Julius’s spell, which effectively protected us from damage, none of the enemy’s magical attacks hit.

Brad darted out and threw up both hands, preparing to unleash his own destructive spell on the skeletal army. A number of magical circles manifested in the air behind him and slowly began to spin. “Hellfire Inferno!” He slowly brought his arms in, moving his hands closer and closer to one another—until at last, he clasped them together.

Sensing the moment was at hand, Julius dropped his guard, allowing the barrier to disperse. At that exact moment, swirling flames burst forth from the magic circles surrounding Brad and hurtled toward the skeletal army. No sooner did the inferno swallow the undead than it exploded. Sweat poured down Brad’s face as he sank to his knees.

“Did I get them?” he rasped, hopeful that his magic had managed to eradicate our foes.

Alas, through the still-burning embers that littered the inner corridor came

another wave of skeletons. Jilk set to sniping them with his rifle, but their numbers only seemed to multiply.

“It seems we’ve made a fuss and drawn out even more enemies,” said Luxion.

That was a success in my book, though.

“Bring it on. We’ll clean ’em out in one go. Chris, Greg, time to roll.” I set my rifle aside in favor of a sword.

Chris eyed me with confusion. “I thought you said you were going to stand back and watch?”

“Changed my mind. Looks like we’ve got a good chance of winning, so I’m going in with you.”

Greg took a stance with his spear, eyes fixed on the enemy. He grinned. “You really are twisted.”

“Can it. Time to take out the trash.”

As we charged forward, Chris and Greg were the first to make contact with the enemy. They were normally complete dullards, but when it came to close-quarters combat, they were unmatched. It took Chris no time at all to cut down two undead.

“Hah!”

His swordplay was so smooth and elegant, his blade seemed to dance through the air as he turned one monster after another into nothing but ash and smoke.

Greg was the exact opposite, like a berserker overwhelming the enemy with brute force.

“Graaah!”

Their weapons were effective against the undead thanks to the silver coating Luxion had put on them. But even ignoring that advantage, their strength was impressive. Greg skewered his enemies, piercing skeletal warriors, shield and all. As soon as he took one out, he was on to the next. His barbaric fighting style stood in stark contrast to Chris’s, but even as they fought back to back, they never got in each other’s way.

Luxion and I dove through the openings they created, careful not to disrupt their flow, as we charged into the swarm. Up ahead, I spotted one skeleton with a bow and arrow that was taking aim at Greg.

“This guy’s first, huh?” I swung my blade in a rising slash. The tip scraped the floor, sending sparks flying before it found its mark and halved the undead at the waist.

As soon as I took out that one, I scanned the area for my next target. Luxion beamed a red light at another enemy. “Master, that one is targeting them as well.”

Hidden in the shadows was another bow-wielding skeleton.

“Good job spotting this one!” I tossed my sword aside and grabbed a pistol from the holster at my hip. It was loaded with bullets coated in silver, each one fetched at an insanely high price. Normally, I would have been more prudent in deciding when and how many to use, but since Luxion had provided the ammunition in vast quantities, there was no need to be stingy.

“Custom-made,” I said to myself. “I’ll be happy to make good use of these.”

I fired twice, each bullet striking the monster. Theoretically, I could have used as many rounds as I wanted, but I had only been able to carry so many into the fortress. It wasn’t a space problem; the bullets were tiny. However, lumps of metal get kind of, you know, *heavy* in large quantities.

I continued unleashing my silver rounds on the enemy, taking down one after another. In the midst of this, Julius managed to catch up. “Guys, leave some for me!”

“Your Highness, please stay back where it’s safe,” I said in a weary monotone. I’d just *known* he’d try to wriggle his way into danger—as always.

Blood rushed to Julius’s face, not from embarrassment but anger. His sword tore through one of the skeletons that lunged at him. “*You* shoved me in front of the enemy!”

“Oh, yay, you got to be useful! Now you can brag to Marie.” I snickered.

Luxion eyed us and muttered, “You two have grown awfully close.”

Chapter 6:

Erica and Mia

WHILE LEON and his companions were caught in a vicious battle, Finn and his partner Brave escorted Mia and Erica through the first floor of the old fortress. It was quiet, as the other parties had since taken out whatever monsters had been present.

When the group slipped into the sunlit inner courtyard, they discovered some altogether unfamiliar flora.

“Sir Knight, what’s this called?” Mia wondered as she crouched on the ground, studying one of the plants.

The sight was almost blinding to Finn—not because of the glaring rays pouring down around them but because, in that moment, Mia seemed so pure.

If only my little sister could have played out in the sunlight as energetically as this... Finn’s mind wandered back to his previous life and the sister he’d left behind. He couldn’t help seeing her in this girl.

“I’m afraid I’m not familiar with this species,” Finn said gently as he gazed down at the plant. “This place seems to be isolated from the outside world. This may be a brand-new species of plant.”

“Brand-new?! Isn’t that a huge discovery?”

“Indeed it is. A result of your successful adventuring.”

“Eh heh heh!” Mia grinned at Finn, and he patted her on the head.

“You have quite a soft spot for Mia, Partner,” said Brave. “It’d be nice if you showed me the same amount of love.”

“Hm? Maybe next time, Kurosuke.”

Tears beaded at the edges of Brave’s single eye. “It’s always like this. You always pick Mia over me. I get it. After all, I’m just a Demonic Suit whose only purpose is to serve in battle whenever the whim takes you, huh?!”

Mia forced herself to smile. "You must really have loved that play we went to go see."

Brave's theatrics were partially a consequence of his fascination with a show they had watched at one of the capital's theaters. He balled up two tiny fists and straightened as he declared, "Yes. That was precisely one of the phrases they used in that melodrama."

"You learn the most ridiculous, unnecessary things," Finn said. He never would have guessed that his partner would have such a penchant for theater.

"It's an evocative tale about a man who attempts to promise himself to two different women. Observing how the actor portrayed the male protagonist as he was driven into a corner was greatly entertaining."

"Sounds like a play about Bartfort," Finn said.

Mia likely shared his feelings in that regard, but since Leon was nobility of a foreign nation, she nevertheless scolded her knight for his impertinence. "Sir Knight, you're crossing the line."

"It's fine. He knows it too." Finn smirked.

Mia blinked slowly, initially taken aback by his reaction, but soon she wore a smile of her own. "You seem to be enjoying yourself. It's almost like you and the duke are friends."

"Huh?" It was Finn's turn to be shocked, but the more he thought about it, the more sense her comment made. *We do both come from Japan, and we've endured similar hardships. Maybe that's why?* Did everyone around them think so as well? While Finn contemplated the possibility, he caught something out of the corner of his eye. "Princess Erica!"

Erica's face was contorted in pain. Finn rushed to her side. She was clutching her chest with both hands while sweat poured down her face. In spite of her suffering, she forced a smile, trying to allay Finn and Mia's concern.

"I'm all right. I just tire easily, since I'm unaccustomed to moving around so much."

"Is that really all? Then I think we ought to return to the ship," Finn said.

Erica's gaze wandered to Mia. "Are you all right?"

Mia jumped in surprise. "M-me? I'm fine! My body is in great condition today, and I don't feel the least bit winded!"

Brave scanned the surrounding area. "That's because the air here is filled with demonic essence. In fact, it's only grown thicker, since they're taking out so many monsters. This is likely the ideal environment for Mia."

Finn's eyes lit up. "Is it really? Then... Then if we took this island for ourselves, Mia would no longer have to suffer?!"

"Wh-what are you saying, Sir Knight?! There's no way we could buy this island."

"If it would help you, I'll do whatever it takes to earn the money necessary to purchase it!" Finn's resolve was set.

Brave lowered his gaze. "That won't work. It's only because of the monsters. If we wipe them out, they'll stop appearing, and it'll be the same as any other island."

And there was no way Mia could spend her life in an old fortress teeming with undead. On the other hand, getting rid of them and cleaning the place up would only reduce the demonic essence in the air, defeating the purpose.

Finn's shoulders slumped. "Oh..."

Mia took his hand, sensing that he was crestfallen. She flashed him a smile, proud to call this man, who was willing to jump through any and all hoops on her behalf, her knight. "Please don't worry about it. Having you at my side is everything I could ask for. And Bravey, too, of course."

"Why am I being treated like some paltry extra?!" Brave demanded, indignant.

As everyone else laughed, Erica joined them with a smile, her hands still clutching her chest. But when she lowered her gaze, her expression was pensive.

A deafening pop echoed through the room. The fired bullet pierced clean

through the forehead of a four-armed undead monstrosity. A fiery explosion ensued, during which the skeletal creature tried to flee, but there was no escaping the flames that were already consuming it. It soon crumbled into nothing but ash and smoke, taking the fire with it.

Angie ejected the empty shell casing from her rifle, which clattered with a hollow sound as it hit the ground. It rolled across the floor, the magic circle carved into its exterior briefly visible as it did so.

The magic bullets Angie was using were potent in and of themselves, but they were all the more powerful in her hands, likely because of a particular compatibility with her own magic.

“So this is the farthest room in this wing, hm?” Angie said to herself.

What resembled a treasure box sat inside the room, but the wood had rotted, and the contents were visible. Noelle made her way over to it and dipped her hand inside. “Look, gold coins!” she exclaimed as she pulled out a handful. “This means we hit the jackpot, right?”

Although she was delighted with their discovery, the other two girls were not as enthused. Livia lifted the lamp to get a better look at the walls, which were covered in frescos and paintings. She studied them, her expression thoughtful.

“These haven’t been preserved very well,” Livia said, “but it’s still a significant discovery. We may be able to learn more if we send a specialized team to investigate.”

Angie, meanwhile, let out a small breath as she regarded their prize. She was doing her best not to let her disappointment show, but Noelle could read it in her eyes.

“We did get our hands on some treasure, but is that really it?” Angie asked. “If this place is called ‘Fortress of the Golden Hands,’ I would have thought there’d be much more.”

The treasure they had already obtained would have ensured that an ordinary civilian could live the rest of their life worry-free. But Angie had a point. For a dungeon with the word *gold* in its name, this place wasn’t terribly impressive.

While Noelle occupied herself with flipping a golden coin between her fingers,

Cleare drifted into the room. “I’ve finished checking the other rooms and corridors. We’ve nabbed the treasure we came for. Can’t we call this adventure a success and leave it here?”

“I would say so, but Miss Angelica doesn’t seem satisfied,” said Noelle.

Angie had likely hoped to achieve something even more impressive. Even so, as she removed the lid of the treasure chest and peeked inside, a smile spread across her face. “Not bad for one last memory.”

Noelle overheard Angie’s murmur and stepped closer. “What do you mean? How is this the last?”

Angie smiled wryly. “I’m busier than I look, you know. Opportunities to venture into dungeons won’t come often.”

Her reasoning sounded convincing, but Noelle was skeptical—especially after Angie had been so excited to go on this trip. It wasn’t like her to give up on ever going on another one.

“You’re lying,” Noelle decided.

Angie turned away. “You’re sharper than I gave you credit for.”

“Honest answer, please! Liv, hop in here and—”

Before Noelle could enlist Livia’s help, Cleare interrupted them with a gasp. “Ah?! Master found another entrance to the underground!”

Angie’s brows furrowed, a flicker of bright resolve reigniting in her eyes. The fleeting glimpse of vulnerability moments earlier faded away. She was determined not to be outdone.

“We’re heading straight there!” Angie declared to the girls.

Chapter 7:

Adventurer's Blood

WE HAD DISCOVERED another entrance to the dungeon beneath the fortress.

"The first one was a total dud. This one better work out," I said.

The first entrance the idiot brigade and I discovered hadn't yielded anything significant in terms of treasure. I had visited this dungeon repeatedly during my playthroughs, but those had been so long ago that I remembered very little. I definitely didn't know where things were located, or whether there were traps or other gimmicks to watch out for. Worse, sometimes my memory was straight-up wrong, which was making this whole trip a lot less smooth than I'd anticipated.

Jilk placed a bomb on the door and scurried back to us, trailing a wire behind him. "Find somewhere to take cover, if you please."

We did as advised and ducked into the shadows. Once we were in place, Jilk gripped the end of the wire and poured mana into it, making it glow faintly. As it did, there was an earsplitting blast, and a light tremor ran through the floor underfoot. The resulting smoke slithered away down the stairwell.

Greg stepped out to see if our attempt had been successful, but he soon returned, shaking his head and looking discouraged. "No luck. That is one tough door."

Brad put a hand to his chin and grinned. "That just proves that the treasure beyond is worth the effort. Shall we redouble our efforts?"

We turned our gazes to Jilk, who had the greatest expertise when it came to explosives. He frowned. "I've already used all the blasting powder I brought. We'll need to return to the ship to resupply if we wish to proceed along this course."

Brad shrugged. "I suppose we don't have much choice, in that case. Shall we return for now and try again tomorrow?"

Outside, the sun descended below the horizon, bathing the sky in a vibrant crimson.

“Once night falls, the monsters in this fortress will be in their element,” Julius noted. “Undead are at their strongest after the sun sets.”

During the game, I’d had no reason to worry about time; most dungeons ignored the day-night cycle when you were inside them. There were a few key events that the player could only trigger at night, but those were the exception.

Luxion’s eye flashed red. “Master, I recommend returning.”

“Hmm, I get that, but this looks like the last area.”

It seemed silly to make the trek all the way back here tomorrow if we would only spend a couple of hours all told. Part of me wanted to hurry and finish. On the other hand, we had no pressing reason to endanger ourselves.

“Let’s fall back,” I concluded. “We’ll rendezvous with the others and head back to camp.”

Chris let out a small sigh. “That’s for the best. We have plenty of days left.”

Our group was wrapping up to leave when thundering footsteps echoed in our direction. Alarmed, the boys grabbed their weapons. I lifted my rifle, ready for whatever was headed our way.

“It’s only Marie and her followers,” Luxion told us.

She appeared around the corner seconds later, Kyle and Carla close behind her. For some reason, her long blonde hair was a disheveled mess, replete with the occasional leaf poking out.

“Hold it right there!” Marie spotted us packing up and stomped forward—and right past us. She thrust her finger toward the way ahead. “Troops, advance!”

“I understand your eagerness to continue,” said Julius, “but night has already fallen. We can more safely continue our journey in the morning. Let it go for now.”

Marie shook her head. “No. We’re going to finish this today and hightail it back to the capital.”

Her reckless declaration left the moron patrol speechless.

I sneered, annoyed by Marie's selfishness. "I make the rules here, and I say we go home and pick up tomorrow. Pack it in, folks." It only made sense for me to call the shots; I'd come up with the whole excursion, and we'd used my airship to come. I was responsible for everyone's safety. If anyone got hurt, that was on me. I wasn't about to entertain Marie's nonsense.

"Your Grace, might I have a moment of your time?" Kyle asked.

"What is it? I hope you don't think you're gonna change my mind."

"No, that is not my intention. I only want to say that my mistress has been driven all day."

Apparently Marie had been pushing herself since the minute we woke up, set on claiming whatever treasure she could find to earn her independence. I paused to study her. The impatience was clear as day on her face.

"Just a little bit more," she said. "If I can clear this dungeon, I won't have to look so pathetic in front of her."

I knew immediately who this "her" was, but I hesitated. Did that justify prioritizing this adventure over our own safety?

"It will be more dangerous to proceed any further tonight," Luxion warned, sensing my hesitation, "but it is possible to continue and finish."

"So there's no problem if we keep going?"

"I would not recommend it. You have avoided battling the undead-type monsters thus far, so I have very little data to offer. I could provide a more accurate assessment if I had more information."

It almost sounded like he was getting a little blamey at yours truly—saying that my scaredy-cat ways had deprived him of necessary intel.

"It's not like I was avoiding the undead. I just had no reason to fight them," I said.

"As usual, you have prepared the perfect excuse. Yet here I am, still hoping you'll one day surprise me with an ounce of maturity. What an absolute shame."

“Can it.”

As we were debating, Angie strolled up. Noelle was close behind her, cradling a bag of what I assumed to be treasure. Livia was on their heels, holding something of her own, but whatever it was, it looked like junk to me.

Cleare hovered before them and zoomed over once she saw me. “Master, get this! We found treasure! I’ll bet you guys didn’t find squat, but we sure did! Praise me, praise me!”

“Good job. Now shoo.” I pushed Cleare aside so I could see my fiancées.

“Meanie!”

“I assume this means you guys won, huh?”

Angie promptly shook her head. “Can I really hold my head high and say I’ve beaten you with this measly prize? It seems that whatever lies ahead of this door is the fortress’s real treasure.”

Everyone turned to the sturdy door blocking the way into the rest of the dungeon. Then their attention turned to me as they awaited my decision. The pressure was suffocating.

I scratched my head and sighed. “Fine. We’ll keep going.”

“Are you certain?” Luxion asked.

“Let’s hurry up and get this over with so we can go home.”

“Very well.”

Luxion and Cleare simultaneously shot lasers from their eyes in a combined beam of red and blue, which shattered the lock on the door.

Jilk grimaced. “If that was an option all along, you should have said so. We wasted my blasting powder.”

Sorry about that, Jilk. But I told the Als to keep their assistance during this trip to a minimum.

I stole a glance at Angie, noting how delighted she looked by the opened door. Her attitude was the polar opposite of what it had been during our date.

Luxion and Cleare drifted back as Luxion said, “Master, we have broken the

lock. You may proceed.”

I stepped in front of the group and looked over my shoulder at them. “So, shall we make it a race? See who’s fastest to get to the depths?”

The atmosphere shifted. Livia, Noelle, and Kyle were taken aback by the impact of my challenge—pure provocation. Not being Holfortian nobility, they didn’t share our thirst for competition.

Angie shed any unnecessary equipment, letting it drop to the floor. “I like it when rules are simple,” she said. “Makes it easy to determine the winner.”

The others followed her example, removing anything they didn’t need. *Thunks* and *clangs* echoed through the hallway, and the ground was soon littered with all manner of objects.

“I’m gonna be first!” Marie made a mad dash for the door in an attempt to beat the competition by snagging an unfair head start. Sadly for her, I snatched her by the collar and jerked her to a halt.

“Dummy.” She was so light that I had no trouble lifting her. She thrashed wildly, but with her feet unable to find purchase, she was helpless. “Everyone ready? Then let’s go!”

“I’m first!” Greg shouted as he took the lead, using his brawny arms to push the heavy metal door open.

Jilk took advantage of his slowed momentum to slip through the crack . “Thanks for going out of your way to open the door for us, Greggy.”

Now that Greg was being such a gentleman, the other competitors cleanly darted over the threshold. Angie stopped in her tracks just as she was about to pass me. “Are you giving yourself a handicap because you’re confident you can win?”

“If I didn’t, everyone would moan and groan when I still came out on top, right? Better to give them the lead. That way they’ll have no excuse when they lose.” That wasn’t a lie; no one would acknowledge my win if I gave myself any unfair advantages.

Angie bought my excuse, and she dashed ahead, grinning. “Say what you

want, victory is mine.”

Marie flailed wildly in my grasp. “Hey! Put me down! They’re going to leave me in the dust!”

I sighed and did as she asked, but I leaned in to whisper a warning in her ear. “If you want to show Erica that you can be a proper mom, play fair and square. You can’t brag if you cheat your way to victory.”

Marie shoved me aside. “That idealism is for people who always win. I’ve always had to claw my way up from the bottom, so my only choice is to claim victory by whatever means necessary!” She glanced back at Kyle and Carla. “Come on, you two! We’re going!”

They scrambled to catch up as she jetted off.

“Please wait!”

“Lady Marie, don’t leave us!”

With that, everyone else had gone ahead.

Luxion drifted over to me. “If you continue to dawdle, you’ll lose this competition.”

“You sure about that?” I grinned.

Sure, to the outside observer, it looked like I was at a serious disadvantage. Little did they know, I had a good reason for hanging back.

“I’ve forgotten a lot, yeah, but there’s still quite a bit I remember.”

“I assume you’re referring to your knowledge of the game?”

“Yep. I blanked out on a lot of stuff about this place, but I *do* remember this path.”

Luxion bobbed up and down thoughtfully. “In other words, you recall exactly where the treasure is located.”

“Bingo.”

“For a moment, I was impressed that you were trying to keep things fair, but I should have known there was more to it. You never fail to live up to my expectations—it’s one of your most negative qualities.”

“Aw, c’mon, I’d feel bad if I betrayed your expectations.” I pressed a hand to my chest, holding my head high. “In fact, from here on out, I plan to do my utmost to live up to everyone’s great expectations!”

“What a commendable scumbag you are, Master.”

People can call me scum all they like. In the end, I’m still coming out on top!

Entering the last section of the dungeon gave me flashbacks to my own playthroughs.

“This place was especially memorable.”

Square tiles covered the floor, while the walls were made of brick. Luxion floated close to my shoulder, illuminating the path. “Was there something in particular that made the memory so enduring?”

“I took on this dungeon after dark in the real world. Having to face undead in that atmosphere was kind of terrifying.”

“I see. So you are scared of them.”

“That’s not what I mean. It was scary ’cause it was nighttime, that’s all.”

I strode down the corridor, guided by my recollection. In the distance, I heard the clamor of battle. Someone had run into monsters. There was nothing to slow me down since everyone had cleared the path for me. Finally, I arrived at what looked like a dead end.

“It seems we can proceed no farther,” Luxion said. “No... Is this a secret passageway?”

“Bingo.”

This very secret door had given me no end of trouble when I tried to beat the dungeon. The Fortress of the Golden Hands had a number of levels below ground, and they were far more labyrinthine than any of the game’s other dungeons. I found myself going in circles, at least until I got so fed up that I looked up a guide. That was where I discovered the true secret of this fortress: The treasure was hidden behind a secret door close to the entrance. At the time, I had been so infuriated by this revelation that I’d chucked my controller

across the room.

I activated the secret switch, and the wall slid open, revealing a hidden path.

“Now I understand why you saw no need to hurry,” Luxion said.

“Seems like Marie had no clue. I’m guessing she didn’t know the trick to getting in here.”

While Marie had played through some of the first game, she had given up partway through. There was a good chance she didn’t know about this particular dungeon at all, given how little she’d cared for the combat component of the game. Her behavior suggested she thought she’d merely forgotten about this place, but I was willing to bet she’d never known about it at all.

“This makes me pity Marie,” said Luxion. “No matter how she tried during this trip, your victory was guaranteed.”

“I was gonna show her how to get in if she’d just listened to me.”

Stupid little sister.

I stepped inside the hidden corridor. A flurry of footsteps echoed behind me. Bemused, I glanced back to see Julius and his dumb little company standing there.

“We found you, Leon!”

I was genuinely shocked that these morons had thought to come after me.

“What’re you guys doing here?!” I demanded.

Chris pressed his index finger to the bridge of his glasses, pushing them up on his nose as his lips curled into a smirk. “After hurrying inside, we found ourselves asking, why did you seem to be in no hurry to beat us here?”

“Yep.” Greg rested his spear on his shoulder. “After all, you found this place. Only makes sense you might’ve kept some secrets to yourself, yeah?”

Brad sneered, pressing a hand to his head. “You really are an underhanded coward. You only pushed the narrative that this was supposed to be a fair fight because you knew about this secret entrance. Or do you intend to protest?”

I retreated a step, which made Jilk grin as he strode toward me. “It’s true; we were nearly fooled by your act. Alas, you’re all too predictable. It was terribly strange to see you partake in a competition where the odds weren’t tipped in your favor. It was obviously suspicious.”

You’re kidding me. These guys actually saw through me?! I had been so convinced that, being the dimwits they were, I would have no trouble deceiving them. Seemed I was wrong. I had pulled the rug out from under these lunkheads once too often, and now they knew to expect it.

I clicked my tongue and spun around, making a dash for it. The league of dimwits followed, hot on my tail.

“Don’t let him get away!”

“It seems the prince and his entourage understand you far better than your own fiancées,” Luxion said, sounding a little *too* thrilled by this latest twist.

This sick jerk is enjoying this, isn’t he?

“I wasn’t trying to trick the girls!”

“A bold claim, given the situation. I should add that, considering the unfair nature of this advantage, I have already informed Cleare. Your dearly beloveds are headed this way.”

“What?!” I shrieked, cold beads of sweat trickling down my forehead. *Oh, this is bad. This is real bad.*

“Moreover, Cleare forwarded a message from Angelica. She says: ‘You have some nerve, tricking us like that.’ Oh, I am so looking forward to what will happen once this is over.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure as hell not!”

I pumped my legs as fast as they would go, desperate to outrun the goofus gang, when monsters appeared on the path ahead. I exchanged my rifle for my pistol, quickly gunning down the looming undead. They disappeared in puffs of smoke. Unfortunately, in the process, I lost speed and found myself neck and neck with Julius and company.

“We’ve caught you, Leon!”

“You dirty cheaters, ambushing me in cold blood!”

“You have no right to say that!”

As much as I tried, I had no luck outrunning them. Moreover, I spotted a familiar trap just ahead. It was a simple sort, triggered by stepping on the wrong tile. A wisp of pressure and spears would jut out of the wall. This only took a few hit points in a game, but in real life, it could kill. And, of course, Julius was too preoccupied with yelling at me to keep an eye on his surroundings—so yes, *obviously* he stepped on the wrong tile.

“You moron!”

Panicked, I grabbed Julius by the collar and yanked him down to the ground with me. Several spears flew out of the wall just above us. I scowled at Julius where we lay, collapsed on the floor. He was sweating bullets, having realized that he’d narrowly escaped being skewered.

“Sorry... Thanks for saving me,” he managed.

“Forget that and get on your feet! Those dinguses you call friends have already passed us!” I yanked him up and forced him to look ahead, where his foster brother—the man with whom Julius had been raised, in whom he placed his utmost trust—was speeding off without us.

“We’ll go on in your stead, Your Highness!” Jilk called over his shoulder.

“Jilk! You’re supposed to be my brother!”

“I am! But when it comes to treasure, all men are rivals!”

“I almost lost my life!” Julius cried. “And you abandoned me in my moment of peril?!”

“I trusted you could take it!”

We scrambled to catch up with the clown club. It turned out to be easy enough, since monsters got in their way to slow them down too. Soon, all six of us were running together again, arrows zooming past us from behind.

Luxion glanced back. “There are a number of skeletal archers in pursuit. It would be inadvisable to leave them unchecked. I recommend dispensing with them.”

I didn't like the idea of being pelted constantly from the rear, but if we chose to fight, we'd lose time, and this was a competition. Moreover, one of these chucklenuts might well backstab the rest of us and run ahead toward the treasure. I couldn't chance that.

I gritted my teeth. "Sorry. Forgive me for this, Julius."

"Huh?!"

I tripped him.

Julius was left behind while the rest of us kept running. He pulled himself to his feet, but the monsters were already on him. He couldn't have escaped if he wanted to. Instead, he was forced to throw up his shield as he screamed at us.

"Surely you haven't forgotten that I am a *prince*! You intend to use your kingdom's *prince* as a *diversion*?!"

I snickered. "Aw, you dummy—people's lives are more important than their status!"

"How can you say that when you've put *my life* on the line?!" For all Julius's whining, he had no trouble taking down the skeletons.

"Julius, I won't let your sacrifice be in vain—I swear it!"

We wiped our (nonexistent) tears and left him in the dust.

We soon came to a spot where the corridor split in three directions, but monsters popped out of the two side corridors. If we could slip by and outrun them, that would be fine and dandy. The problems would only arise if they gave chase. The situation would be solved if one person stayed behind to take care of the beasts, but not a soul in the group moved to volunteer.

Selfish jerks.

Just as we were on the cusp of dashing past the waiting handful of undead, Jilk tossed a handkerchief to the ground. His exaggerated alarm cut the air. "Oh, no! I dropped the handkerchief that Miss Marie gave me! How clumsy! And after she prayed so earnestly for our safety, entrusting it to me as a good luck charm!"

Greg and Chris had been close enough to see that this was no accident and

kept running. However, Brad apparently hadn't realized it was all a ploy.

"How could you drop something so precious?!" Brad cried as he dove head-first to grab it. Of course, he figured out that he'd been duped once he got a good look at it. "This is *your* stupid handkerchief, Jilk!"

Jilk's name was probably embroidered on it or something—dead giveaway. But although Brad had realized his error, it was too late. The monsters were upon him.

An explosive medley of magic and cursing erupted behind us.

"You'll all pay for this, I swear!"

Two saps down, three to go.

Greg cackled. "Don't worry, I'll take enough treasure for you and His Highness both!"

"I think you'll find that I'll be winning this!" Chris swore, his hunger for victory no less fervent than his friend's.

Greg and Chris were more physically fit than Jilk and I, and soon they took the lead. We were at a tragic disadvantage when it came to endurance.

Jilk shot me a look. I returned his gaze and instantly grokked what he was thinking.

"Greg and Chris sure are fast," I said loudly. "If this keeps up, we're gonna fall behind, huh?"

"Indeed," said Jilk. "Though it should come as no surprise. They are both reliable frontline warriors capable of protecting Miss Marie."

Although the two in question had a slight lead, they overheard our remarks. The compliments fed their egos too. Little did they know, that was all according to plan.

"Reliable, you say?" I asked. "But which one is stronger? I guess it would have to be Chris, right? Since he's such a remarkable swordsman. Surely he must be the most reliable."

Jilk shook his head. "What are you saying? Greg is clearly superior. His skill

with the spear is founded in actual battle experience. He's saved us countless times."

"C'mon. Chris has to be better, right?"

"No, it's Greg. But just you wait, the moment the next monster pops out, you'll see for yourself."

Up ahead, Chris and Greg were utterly silent as they listened to our exchange. We were a bit winded, having babbled while running at top speed. Part of me worried that we'd been a little too transparent. But while I feared our plan would fail, a group of monsters came into view. Now was the moment of truth. Would Greg and Chris barrel through and keep running?

"I'm Marie's protector—her strongest knight!" Chris launched himself at the monsters, cutting them down.

Greg could hardly ignore the threat when his direct rival made such a declaration. He began hacking away too, shouting, "Don't kid yourself! Marie relies on me more than any of you. Right, guys?!" As he skewered one of the monsters in one swift jab, he paused to seek our agreement.

Unfortunately for Greg, we had already bolted past. Jilk and I were sure to wave goodbye.

"Good luck, idiots!"

"My eternal thanks for being so easy to manipulate!"

It was only once they were swarmed by the monsters that they realized. Like the boys before them, they, too, had been deceived.

"You tricked us!"

"We'll get you for this!"

And then it was just me and Jilk.

He flashed a smile at me. "Leon, I'm afraid it would be pointless for us to do battle with one another. Shall we work together to obtain the treasure? We're neck and neck in this competition."

I nodded, thoughtful. "You have a point. It wouldn't make sense to trouble

each other when we've already made it this far. Oh, but look, the path ahead splits off. Luxion, which one leads to the treasure?"

"Allow me to give you a visual cue." Luxion projected an arrow that floated in the air ahead, pointing toward the left side of the Y-shaped split.

As soon as he knew which path to take, Jilk picked up speed to pass me. Simultaneously, he whipped out an object that he dropped behind him. There was a small explosion as a wall of ice appeared along the entrance to the left path, blocking my way.

I gasped. "A magic item that summons an ice barrier?!"

Through the transparent layer of ice, I could see Jilk pause to wave at me. "Thanks for showing me the way. I'll be claiming the treasure for myself. The rest of you can join me later. *After* I've claimed it. I'll be waiting for you!" Jilk let out a peal of laughter that sounded almost like the ringing of bells—too high-pitched and singsongy for my liking, in other words.

As I watched him go, Luxion changed the direction of his arrow. It now pointed right. To wit, that had been a diversion; all that awaited Jilk was a dead end.

"Good job, Luxion."

"You remember the treasure's location, and hence there was no reason for you to ask me where it was. I reasoned you wanted me to mislead your opponent. However, I'm more interested to know if you suspected that Jilk would betray you from the start."

Suspected? Not exactly. "No, not at all. I had complete faith...that he would stab me in the back."

I'd put on that whole show because I knew he was a conniving rat who would turn on me the second it stood to benefit him. However, I hadn't clued in Luxion. It was a stroke of good luck that he'd realized what I was scheming.

"What an unfortunate object of faith."

"You're telling me." I shrugged, disgusted by Jilk's behavior. "I'd never wanna be a guy like that." Someone who constantly betrayed other people? Sounded

like a douchebag.

“Does that description not apply to you as well, Master? You also betray others on a constant basis.”

“I’m just really, really easily misunderstood in spite of my genuine earnestness,” I said as I started down the left path.

Luxion followed close behind me. “Earnest, indeed. Although only regarding what benefits you. Do you not think it would behoove you to be more earnest toward others as well?”

I clutched my chest, feigning hurt. “Even you misunderstand me! Oh, I’m *pained*.”

“Your act is betrayed by your grin, Master.”

As we proceeded down the right-side pathway, the room holding the treasure came into view. However, there was something strange about the atmosphere. I sensed something lurking behind the door. Creeping closer, I heard a low groan from within.

“Master, I sense the presence of a powerful monster. You said nothing about a beast protecting the treasure. Did you forget?”

I slowly shook my head. “No, there wasn’t anything in the game. Every single time I cleared this place, it was just a straight path to the treasure, end of story. No bosses.”

“Could it be you’ve misremembered?”

“No. Definitely not. Besides—no, hold on a second. What time is it?”

“It has passed seven o’clock at night. The sun has set, and the sky is dark,” Luxion reported.

I turned my gaze to the door and checked the ammunition in both my rifle and handgun. “Didn’t someone say something about the undead being more active at night?”

In the game, I had only ever ventured into and retrieved the treasure during the daytime. I had no way of knowing what happened in the Fortress of the Golden Hands at night. Perhaps reality differed from the game. Or could it be

that this enemy was a night-only event? Either way, violence was my only option.

Luxion stared at me. “You plan to fight by yourself? I believe it would be more prudent to await the prince and his comrades to take this creature on together, thereby guaranteeing a safer route to victory.”

“After I went out of my way to eliminate those fools, it’d be pretty embarrassing if I had to wait for them to catch up, right?”

“I see you can eke out some earnestness when it concerns your pride.”

“I swore I’d never lie to myself about my feelings.”

That was a pretty smooth line if I do say so myself.

Luxion, on the other hand, was less impressed. “You told me once that adults are skilled at lying to themselves. You furthermore claimed that this very habit made you an adult. Doesn’t this seem to contradict that claim?”

I wagged a finger. “Tsk, ts. See, the problem with you AI is that you just can’t adapt. Anyway, let’s get going.” Finished with my preparations, I edged closer and pushed the door open, slipping inside.

Chapter 8:

Master of the Fortress

ANGIE, LIVIA, AND NOELLE raced down the corridors with Cleare in the lead. Her blue lens flickered as she scanned the paths ahead, calculating the shortest route to the treasure.

“This way!”

The paths she’d chosen thus far had led the girls to turn corner after corner in a serpentine pattern. Cleare had chosen the circuitous route because it let them dodge unnecessary fights.

Angie glanced over her shoulder. Noelle was keeping up, but her face contorted in pain. She’d been given a clean bill of health after rehabilitation a while back, but her stamina hadn’t completely recovered. Nor could she feasibly compete with the monstrous endurance of Holfortian nobility like Angie; Angie was on a different level, having trained for this sort of thing all her life. Noelle wasn’t struggling alone either.

“I-I can’t do this anymore,” Livia wheezed, even more winded. Her face pinched as she gasped for air.

Angie slowed her pace to a walk. At this rate, she’d lose them both. If she were on her own, she could have kept going, but her companions had hit their limit.

“Let’s take a break. Cleare, is there anywhere we can rest?”

Livia and Noelle tottered to a stop, collapsing against the wall.

Cleare eyed the girls and sounded a bit annoyed as she said, “We can rest here. I detect neither enemies nor traps in the vicinity. Problem is, we’re losing time. I’ll have to recalculate our route. And while I get why Nelly can’t keep up, what’s your excuse, Liv? You’ve got zero stamina.”

“I-I’m more of...the indoor...type...” Livia managed between gasps.

Livia could concentrate and study for hours at a time, but she was terrible

when it came to exercise.

Angie placed a hand on her forehead, smiling wryly. “This is why I told you to work out more. Endurance is a basic necessity.”

“I prided myself on having above average endurance in the republic, but you Holfortians are inhuman,” Noelle argued, covered in a thin sheen of sweat. “We’ve run for, like, *forever* and you don’t look the least bit tired.”

If this had been an unfettered sprint, the girls probably could have continued for a bit longer. The problem was the armor weighing them down, as well as the weapons in their hands. Combined, their supplies were rather heavy. Hence Noelle was shocked to see that Angie looked fresh as morning dew even after having run for ages. Noelle and Livia were out of breath and about to topple over, while Angie regarded them as if she couldn’t comprehend what had come over them.

“If that’s all it takes to wear you down, you’ll never be adventurers,” Angie said.

Noelle shook her head. “How do you think you’re normal?!”

Once Livia and Noelle had regained their composure, Angie had them start off again, if at a more sedate pace. As the girls went, they began to complain about Leon. Angie in particular kept a smile on her face, but she was unreservedly furious with his underhanded behavior—the nerve of him, hiding that secret route.

“He can be such a scoundrel,” she said. “He went out of his way to pretend this was a fair fight, but all along he was planning to seize victory by underhanded means. He pulled the wool over our eyes.”

“We worked so hard to make it all the way to the end of this route only to have to go the whole way back for that secret passage,” Livia added, angry more because of the exercise than the deception.

The extra mileage issue was only one of the several bones Noelle had to pick with Leon. She found his attitude especially irritating. “He was so adamant about playing fair when we started, right?! And look at him—he gave himself a handicap, but it was only ever a trick. The sheer gall!”

Cleare enjoyed watching the girls stew. “Looks like Master won’t even pull his punches with his fiancées.”

Angie smiled gently. “And it looks like I underestimated his commitment to the fight.”

“You look happy,” Cleare noted. “But how can you smile after all this? He tricked you.”

“I’m happy because it means he’s taking this seriously.” Angie wasn’t particularly pleased with Leon’s trickery, no—but she understood that trickery as his *modus operandi*. Moreover, it meant he truly was trying to win. “Up until now, he’s always protected me. He’s been so delicate—treating me like a princess.”

“I get it,” said Cleare. “So you didn’t like that.”

“I wouldn’t say that. Part of me was happy, but at the same time, standing on the sidelines and watching while he fought made me wonder if he really needed me. In fact, I’ve sometimes found myself thinking that he could live a more peaceful life without me.”

“That’s not true!” Livia scolded from behind. “You always take too much responsibility. The reason Mr. Leon can’t live a peaceful life is because—”

Livia stopped abruptly, hesitant to divulge what she knew. Her silence stretched on and on.

Unable to stand it, Noelle interjected, “Because he’s so nosy. I mean, that’s why he saved me.”

That was indeed one of the reasons Leon kept failing to attain his dreams of peace. He had a nasty habit of sticking his nose into other people’s business. Leon would never have become a hero if he only acted in his own self-interest. On the other hand, neither would he have grown close to any of them. And it wasn’t just his fiancées—he’d bonded with a whole host of people.

“I don’t want to stand in his way,” Angie said honestly. “All I want is for Leon to be happy. But so long as I’m with him, I’ll inevitably draw him into conflicts with which he is otherwise uninvolved.” Angie was so dead set against involving Leon in the current brewing unrest because Leon had made his desire to remain

out of it clear. Even if he hadn't said as much, the mental toll was evident to Angie.

Noelle glanced at Livia. "He hasn't reduced his dose, has he?"

"The dosage hasn't changed since he returned from the republic," said Livia, shaking her head. "Isn't that right, Cleary?"

"Master has forbidden me from answering that question," Cleare said. Her casual and lighthearted tone dissolved into curtness when it came to this topic. At the end of the day, her master was Leon, and when push came to shove, he was her first priority.

Silence fell as Cleare continued leading the girls. Without realizing it, they had at some point breached the secret passage. The sound of fighting echoed ahead—likely Prince Julius and his comrades.

Angie lifted her rifle. "I'd like to avoid friendly fire. Whatever you do, don't shoot unless you're absolutely sure." The corridor was dim and cloaked in shadows. It would be all too easy to injure one another if they fired recklessly.

Livia and Noelle nodded.

Cleare's blue lens flickered. "I've got a route straight back with no enemy contact. Come on, girls!"

A medley of men's voices mixed with the clamor of battle and traveled down the halls, echoing around the girls. They even made out the occasional vow along the lines of, "I swear those guys will pay, even if it's the last thing I do!"

The girls continued until they came upon a path blocked by an ice wall. Livia approached it, frowning. "Is this some sort of secret mechanism we have to pass? Is the treasure beyond this point?"

"Nah, that's not the right way," Cleare said. "Jilk sealed it. Go ahead and ignore it and proceed."

Noelle tilted her head. "Mr. Jilk put this here? But why would he seal the wrong route?"

Angie's expression turned stone cold; she could all too easily guess what had happened. "It seems he misapprehended the treasure's location and sealed the

path behind him. He's a scheming coward, after all."

"He hasn't changed a bit since first year," Livia said in agreement.

As the Holfortian girls continued briskly along, Noelle followed close behind them. "Okay, I agree his methods can be a little questionable, but is he really *that* bad?"

All trace of emotion vanished from Livia's face. "We're discussing a man who secretly attached an explosive to his opponent's Armor during a duel. That isn't even the worst of his transgressions, mind you. He also annulled his engagement to a woman and then refused to meet with her. I could list his sins for hours."

"Oh. I guess he really is worse than I thought." Noelle frowned. She had seen just how much trouble Jilk had caused Marie when they were cohabitating in the republic. It disgusted her to learn that he was worse than she'd realized.

Angie's face was similarly blank as she added, "All five of those boys are troublemakers, but there's no argument that Jilk is the greatest miscreant of all."

As their conversation died down, a suspicious door came into view. It was cracked ajar, allowing the girls to peek inside.

Shadows and darkness hung thickly over this dungeon's many halls, but this room was so covered in gold that it was radiant. It practically screamed, "I'm the treasure room you've been searching for this whole time!" Yet instead of delighting at their discovery, the girls were shocked by what else they saw.

"Leon?!" Angie shouted.

An undead monster and Leon were locked in combat within. The creature's skull resembled that of an animal, and the rest of its body was hidden beneath a black robe. Its arms were abnormally long and large for its body, and each hand was entirely covered in gold. Where one might have expected legs, there was nothing but air—it was levitating. To top it all off, this beast was about three meters tall. It was surprisingly agile too, rapidly darting through the air across the great vault.

Meanwhile, the moment Leon noticed that his fiancées had arrived, he pulled

an aggrieved face.

While I was busy tussling with the boss protecting the treasure room, my fiancées caught up. A surprise, since I had expected the idiot brigade to get there first. This made me panic—not only because it made me fear I was taking too long to beat this thing, but because I also suspected that the girls were pretty ticked at me for my chicanery.

Angie lifted her rifle, firing at the monster as it zipped through the air. It evaded and dove behind a pillar.

We were in something like a throne room. Everything in it was entirely made of gold. Why such a room would be located deep in the dungeons under a fortress was beyond my ability to fathom, but the treasure we were looking for was very obviously right in front of our noses.

The strange thing was that I didn't remember the room looking like this when I'd beaten the dungeon in game. It had been just like all the other dank, dark rooms in this labyrinth.

Livia ran up to me. "Mr. Leon, are you hurt?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

Noelle hurried over to my side as well, sending a nervous look at the beast that peered at us from behind the safety of its pillar. "That thing looks kinda strong. Can you beat it?"

If only I could have taken it down faster! That would be the dream.

Unfortunately, I had failed to do so. I was confident that I wouldn't lose, but I didn't exactly have the best equipment to go toe to toe with this thing.

"It's not gonna take me down, but I'm not sure if I can take it down either," I said. "If only I'd brought my shotgun."

"This is precisely why I told you to bring it," Luxion said, sounding every bit the mother hen intent on nagging me to death. "If you recall, when you solicited my advice as to which weapon you should take, I recommended the shotgun."

“Yeah, but at the time, I didn’t think I’d need it, okay?!”

I hadn’t used it much at all during my playthroughs. How could I have known?

While Luxion and I sniped at each other, the boss shot out from behind its pillar and charged. Angie fired her rifle, but it didn’t so much as slow the thing—we’d need more than one bullet to take it down.

“Tch!”

I tossed a grenade at the ground. It burst, filling the area with a purified mist. The boss retreated to a far corner, putting plenty of distance between us.

Angie sprinted over. With practiced hands, she loaded another round of bullets into her rifle. “Those are holy water grenades, right? How many more do you have?”

“Just one,” I said, chagrined, as I traced my hand along my belt.

“Then should we spread out and attack?” Angie’s gaze never left the creature, even as she discussed our battle plan.

“There’s not much ammunition left, and Livia and Noelle only have pistols, right? Pretty sure that makes this impossible.” Especially since neither Livia nor Noelle were particularly impressive shots. It seemed foolhardy to keep going when the odds were this stacked against us. *Maybe we should just pull out.*

Noelle smacked my back. “I’ve got this, remember?” She had a branch and some leaves clenched in her hand. I didn’t have to wonder where she’d picked them up; I knew immediately that they belonged to the Sacred Tree.

“Did you break those off of poor Sappie?” I asked.

“Of course not! I found the branches lying on the ground, and the leaves are ones I asked Miss Yumeria to trim!”

Oh, I get it. Miss Yumeria must’ve had Kyle bring them for Noelle.

“Can you actually use those things?” I asked.

Noelle huffed. “I *am* the Priestess, you know. Actually, do you wanna use some too? You haven’t forgotten you’re the Guardian, right?”

I hadn’t forgotten, no, but the position came with few bonuses outside the

weird mark that had been permanently etched on the back of my right hand. I therefore didn't typically give it much thought.

"I dunno how to use those," I said.

"You know, sometimes I think it's a real mystery how you were ever chosen."

Whatever. The point was that Noelle had another weapon at her disposal.

I glanced at Livia. Her cheeks puffed as she pouted at me. "I'm perfectly fine as well. Have you forgotten my arcane skills?"

Well, that settles that.

"In that case, we'll spread out and hit it from all directions," I said. "If any of you land in hot water, get close to each other for cover."

We nodded to one another before dispersing to begin our attacks.

Noelle was the first to unleash her power.

"Sacred Tree, lend me your strength!" She tossed one of the branches into the air. It enlarged and latched onto the boss, twisting around the creature in an attempt to bind it. "I did it!" Noelle pumped her fist.

Her celebration came a little too soon; anywhere the branch touched the creature, it turned to gold.

"That's totally cheating!" Noelle cried.

In moments, the gold had spread through the entire branch, turning it into an inert hunk of precious metal before it shattered to dust. At least it bought us some time, even if it was otherwise ineffective.

"Don't worry. I'll take care of this," Livia said. Two magic circles appeared around her. Fire roared out of one while wind lashed out of the other. She combined the elements to amplify the fire's intensity before unleashing her spell on the boss.

"What the heck is that? I've never seen it before." I glanced at Luxion, who was floating beside me as always.

"It is not an advanced spell," he said, offering his analysis. "It appears to be the combination of two schools of magic, which reduces the mana cost without

sacrificing potency—a highly skilled technique.”

Wow. Incredible.

I took aim at the creature with my rifle and fired. It writhed in agony as Livia’s flames enveloped it, throwing back its head and opening its mouth wide as it let out an eerie cry. The fire’s wrath was too strong. To escape, the creature ceased levitating and collapsed to the floor.

“Don’t you dare think you’ll escape us!” Angie thrust her left hand toward the creature, creating a magic circle right beneath the creature’s fallen form. The lines of the circle lit up in an enormous, intricate pattern. A pillar of fire burst forth from it, and the momentum of the flames carried the creature up until it slammed into the ceiling. “Pillar of Hellfire. An incredibly effective spell against you undead, no?”

The creature didn’t answer, but no one expected it to.

Once Angie’s spell dissipated, the boss crashed to the floor. It staggered upright moments after. Angie fired at it with her rifle, but even then, that didn’t finish it off.

“What an obstinate beast,” Angie muttered.

While Livia busied herself with preparing another set of magic circles, Noelle clutched the Sacred Tree’s leaves tightly, ready to unleash another attack of her own.

“Why haven’t you finished it off yet?” Luxion asked in his long-suffering way.

I shook my head. All I could say was “I just... They’re so strong.”

I guess... Maybe there was still some part of me, deep down, that thought of them as helpless. In need of my protection. Yet watching their resolute and well-equipped combat prowess, I started to feel like maybe my fiancées didn’t need me to shelter them. That, in fact, I wasn’t the least bit necessary...

“Master.”

I jolted out of my stupor. Shaking the unbidden thoughts away, I focused on the boss. “Sorry, but it’s time I take this thing down.”

I tossed my final grenade at the beast. It exploded into another cloud of

purified mist that billowed through the room. The holy water particles filling the air ate away at the creature. I dropped my rifle to the ground and yanked the sword at my side from its sheath as I charged. My blade was far more meticulously crafted than the ones I had handed off; Luxion had created it specially for me. It was even more potent against the undead.

As I closed in, one of the creature's golden hands lashed out at me.

"Not so fast!" Noelle tossed her leaves at the creature. The leaves quickened, moved by her will, and attached to the beast. From them sprouted tree roots and ivy that tangled around their target, binding it in place. The creature instantly ripped the bindings away, but they served as a perfect diversion.

"Thanks for that!" I called over my shoulder.

I leaped toward the enemy and ran my blade through its skull. Smoke spilled from its wound. As unrelenting as it had proven, it couldn't withstand this deadly attack. Its body began to crumble to ash. Dust billowed out from its form.



“Phew, it’s over.” My shoulders sagged with relief. Finally, the boss was dead.

Angie, on the other hand, noticed something amiss. “Hey, something’s wrong!”

She was exactly right; the room had been blindingly golden moments earlier, but it lost its dazzling sheen the moment the fortress’s master was vanquished. It turned into the same sort of dank, dark space we’d seen throughout the rest of the dungeon. In short, it became the room I remembered when I’d first confronted it in the game.

Angie’s face fell. “So it was all an illusion? I can’t believe this.”

If the room had retained its former splendor, we could have sold its contents for a handsome price. Alas, the moment its master was gone, the mirage died with it.

Angie’s whole body slumped. Her dejection was profoundly obvious.

“Who cares? We managed to take it out without anyone getting hurt,” Noelle said as she strode toward Angie.

“But I wanted *treasure*.”

In contrast to Angie’s despair, Livia’s face lit up with excitement. “Could that mean this one monster was capable of transforming the entire room? To think it was such an impressive beast. I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

I left the girls, making my way to the spot behind the throne. There was supposed to be a treasure chest there, but...

“A coffin?” I blurted in confusion.

My fiancées raced over to see for themselves.

“This must be the dungeon’s treasure chest,” Angie concluded. “Shall we open it?”

“Huh?! This kind of thing?! Aren’t you scared?” I squeaked in protest, voice raising several octaves.

Livia pressed her hand to her chin. “It *is* scary not knowing what might come out. It would be terribly rude to disturb a body.”

Noelle glanced at Cleare. “Can you tell what’s inside?”

“My scan indicates that it’s some kind of precious metal.”

Angie reached out eagerly. “Then we’re opening it.”

I was still on the side of let’s-not-disturb-the-creepy-coffin. *I’m no fool! I’ve seen the movies! I know we’re headed straight toward Curse City!*

But despite my misgivings, Angie pushed the thing open.

My eyes shot open. “Uh, that’s a person, right?”

For some reason, nestled inside the coffin was a golden sculpture of a beautiful woman. Her hands were clasped together over her stomach, and her eyes were closed, almost as if she was praying. The details were so realistic that it seemed perfectly plausible that she might open her eyes at any moment. Decorations lay neatly around her—flowers and other ornaments made of gold, silver, and gems. It really did look like the inside of a casket, body and all.

Luxion’s red lens flickered as he analyzed the sculpture. “It is pure gold, not a person.”

“Oh, come on. It could’ve been a person who that boss turned to gold,” I said.

“Were that the case, it should have returned to its natural state.”

“Well, yeah, I guess, but still... Do you think that monster with the weird horse skull was protecting this thing?”

“I have a difficult time believing a monster would exhibit such behavior. Moreover, that skull belonged not to a horse but to a donkey.”

“It did?!” Huh. I had been sure it was a horse skull.

I was the only one who seemed unsettled. The girls, Cleare included, were staring at me.

Angie rested a hand on her hip. “I didn’t expect this. Well, I should say I did suspect it, but now I know for certain: Even you’re afraid of something, Leon.”

“Oh, Mr. Leon, that is *adorable*.” Livia smiled broadly, hands pressed flat together.

Noelle seemed similarly pleased to be surprised. Not that it stopped her from

poking fun at me. “Funny how you have no trouble killing monsters, but the undead are another story, huh? If you’re scared, how about I sleep in your bed at night?”

These girls don’t know the meaning of mercy, do they? I thought. “Aren’t you guys being kinda mean?”

A rhetorical question, of course; they were definitely being mean. And did they have to be so harsh?

“I dunno,” said Cleare. “Might have something to do with how you kept that secret passage all to yourself. *I’d* say they must love you an awful lot if they’re letting you off this easy!”

Great. Now the robot’s poking fun too.

Just as I turned the other cheek, the slow echo of footsteps came down the hallway. Julius tottered inside, his body—and by extension, equipment—in shambles. His four friends were close behind him, each in a similar state. Every single one of them glowered at me.

“Leon. I imagine you have something you want to say to me,” Julius’s voice was thick with anger.

“Something I wanna say? Oh, right.” I clapped my hands together and poked my tongue out, cute as could be. “Thanks to your noble sacrifices, I was able to get my hands on the treasure. I appreciate you soooo much!”

Hair thoroughly disheveled after his misadventure down a dead end, Jilk thrust an accusing finger at me. “You *coward*! You misled me!”

“If you’ll remember, you betrayed me first.”

The rest of the bevy of buffoons turned on Jilk, surrounding him. He stared at them blankly. “What’s the matter with you all? I thought we agreed we would take the hammer of judgment to *Leon* for tricking—gah?!”

Brad slammed his fist into Jilk’s face. His clothes were otherwise intact, save for one torn sleeve. As Jilk collapsed on the floor, Brad extracted the tattered handkerchief with which Jilk had deceived him and dropped it on his crumpled comrade’s face.

“You haven’t forgotten what you did to us, have you, Jilk?” Brad asked. “Leon irritates me greatly, yes, but you are every bit the same sort of traitor.”

Greg cracked his knuckles, brows twitching with fury. “Remember how you duped me and Chris into gettin’ all riled with each other?”

Chris removed his shattered glasses. He glared down at Jilk, eyes cold as ice. “I despise Leon for his actions, but I despise you as well.”

They were livid with Jilk for his latest round of treachery. Each and every one of them had been desperate to discover the treasure, only for their efforts to be hamstrung by one of their own.

However, one of the boys was absolutely boiling over.

“Yet at the start, it was every single one of you who turned his back on *me*,” Julius said in a low hiss. His eyes marked all his friends—and me as well. We’d all abandoned him to be our initial decoy. I supposed that made us all his enemies.

“Looks like your friendship turned out pretty fragile once treasure got involved.” I cackled manically. “Pretty ugly of all of you, elbowing your bestest buddies out of the way like that.”

Except then the cretins unsheathed their weapons and started toward *me*, Julius at the lead. “I suppose you’re right,” he said. “So. I believe that before we turn on one another, we’ll start by beating you to a pulp.”

I shrugged and shook my head. “Aw, you dummy. I’ve got my fiancées to back me up. Girls, help!”

But when I looked over my shoulder, I discovered that Luxion had, at some point, wandered over to Angie, and they were engaged in a discussion about the treasure.

“As much as I’d like to leave this the way it is, I guess we’ll probably have to melt it down,” said Angie.

“Counterpoint: In addition to being a precious work of art, it has considerable value as a historical relic,” Luxion said. “I suspect it will benefit future generations a great deal if we left it intact.”

“I suppose that’s true. If we use it as decoration, we’d have a permanent reminder of our accomplishments today.”

Meanwhile, Livia and Noelle were occupied with Cleare.

“Personally, I think we ought to store it somewhere safe. It may hold secrets we have yet to uncover!” Livia was understandably in favor of preserving the statue.

“I mean, I guess it looks pretty impressive,” Noelle said with obvious disinterest. “But is it really that amazing, Cleare?”

“It’d be tough trying to explain it to you, but basically, yeah. Just think of it as something amazing. Not like you’d get it if I told you anyway.”

“Aren’t you being a little too dismissive of me?”

“It’s not like you’re interested in it though, right?”

Flabbergasted, I reached toward the girls. “What? You mean you aren’t going to help me?”

As one, they gave me the cold shoulder.

Angie folded her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. “You made your bed. It’s time for you to lie in it. Maybe you’ll finally learn your lesson.”

As if her refusal hadn’t cut me to the quick, even my partner saw fit to abandon ship. “These are your just deserts for your deceit. A fitting end for your actions, Master.”

My whole body trembled. “Angie, Livia, and Noelle I can kinda understand, but *you* should hop in to help me, Luxion!”

“I refuse. More importantly, your friends are waiting for you.”

“Huh?”

The second I turned around, Julius clapped his hands on my shoulders. My bones creaked as his fingers dug into my flesh. A dark smile spread across his face.

“Let’s have ourselves a little chat—and a couple of fist sandwiches while we’re at it.”

The whole clod squad grinned at me threateningly. They were convinced that this was the moment they would finally gang up on me and give me a good pounding. How could a poor, weak individual like me cope with such a situation? I was reduced to shivering in place.

Or so it seemed.

I let out a small sigh. “Shouldn’t you take responsibility for your own gullibility? Hate to break it to you, but this treasure is ours now. But look on the bright side, losers, I’ve got a big heart. Go on and tell me... How are you feeling right now, having let your heart’s desire slip through your fingers?” I smirked, doing my absolute best to be as antagonizing as possible.

Julius reeled back his arm and took a swing—so I did the same. Our fists grazed past one another before landing. His crashed into my cheek and mine plowed into his. The other idiots soon joined in, though not before I clocked Julius a second time.

“Eat this, you leeches! You oughta be grateful I even brought your sorry butts along!” I howled.

Julius snapped back, “What was that nonsense you spouted about a fair competition?! You were aiming to win it all for yourself from the very beginning!”

From there, it devolved into a no-holds-barred six-way brawl.

Angie and Luxion watched from the sidelines.

“What a disturbing match this has become,” said Angie.

Luxion moved his eye from side to side. “Master has such a penchant for shooting himself in the foot. Try as I might to stop him, his aim is ever true.”

I’m gonna remember this, Luxion!

Chapter 9:

Separation

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, we filled the *Einhorn*'s hold with the treasure we had collected from the Fortress of the Golden Hands. Our loot consisted of not only gold and silver but a number of miscellaneous items, such as vases and other goods. In terms of a dungeon raid, it had been a rather successful trip. After divvying it all up, we realized we would make quite a sizable profit once we sold it all off.

Yet in spite of our accomplishments, Marie collapsed to her knees in front of the treasure, sobbing.

"Lady Marie, please keep yourself together!" Carla cried, trying to console her.

"Mistress, let's dry those tears, all right?" Kyle implored.

Despite their attempts, Marie was inconsolable. "I-I can't help you, you guys! This is too cruel. We searched so hard—every nook and cranny. And the whole time, no one said a word to us about that secret passageway!"

Without Cleare to relay the message, both Marie and Jake's teams had remained totally in the dark about our secret passage shenanigans. Thus, in spite of the lengths Marie and her comrades had gone to, they'd walked away with very little to show for it.

"But, um, it wasn't all for naught!" Carla tried to reassure her. "We managed to clear that dungeon as proper adventurers. There can be no doubt about that. That in itself is an incredible accomplishment! One we can be proud of for the rest of our lives!"

"I wasn't looking for bragging rights! I wanted the *treasure*!" Marie wailed.

Carla wasn't wrong, to be clear; this adventure of theirs would be a worthy tale to tell for years to come. Adventurers and their accomplishments had a lot of cultural capital in Holfort. Mere participation in this trip had earned them a

share of honor. Alas, it was not prestige for which Marie had so yearned but the fat stacks of cash she could've earned with priceless artifacts and what not. It was heartbreaking to see her deep-seated motivation lead absolutely nowhere.

Kyle sneered at me. "My lord, you truly are the scum of the earth. I suspect your heart pumps not blood but ice."

"I told you, I was trying to be nice. If Marie had heeded my warning, I would've let her come with me and split the treasure."

"You're really going to say that *now*?" Kyle paled as he glanced over his shoulder.

Marie's tears had dried, but the redness and swelling had yet to abate. She looked straight at me, eyes glazed over. All hint of emotion had vanished. It sent a chill down my spine. She looked one hundred percent like a ghost or a horror movie spirit.

"Eep!" I squeaked involuntarily, retreating a step.

At sudden and ridiculously inhuman speeds, Marie skittered toward me on all fours. Even her movements were bone-chilling, reminiscent of a centipede. Her limbs latched around me, and when she craned her neck to look me in the eye, her expression was still entirely blank. Her eyes had clouded, and all I could see within them were shadows.

"Is it fun...?" Marie asked. "Tell me. Do you enjoy it? Does it give you a rush to make people regret their choices? You realize that when you tell a person that things would have been better if they had acted just a tiny bit differently, it makes them hate themselves even more...right?"

"And let's be honest, even if I had done as you said and agreed, you wouldn't have helped me, would you? Tell me I'm wrong. Well, go on—tell me!" Marie shook my leg, desperate for an answer. Through all this, her voice held no emotion whatsoever. That only made it more terrifying.

"S-sorry, okay? If it's money you want, I'll give it to you."

"And I already *told* you there's no *point* if you just *give it* to me!"

"Yes, ma'am!" I yelped, back going ramrod straight.

As Marie clung to my leg, she burst into tears again. “I wanted to find the treasure so I could become independent.”

In any other situation, I would have advised her to get a normal job instead of gambling on finding enough treasure to pay her way for the rest of her days. But at that moment, I didn’t have the courage. Instead, I tried to redirect the conversation to distract Marie from her fury.

“So, uh, Princess Erica’s condition seems to have stabilized. Cleare said we’re free to go visit her when we want.”

Erica had been receiving treatment in the sickbay. Naturally, Marie was worried for her well-being. The second she heard she was free to visit her daughter, she disentangled from me and sped out of the hangar.

“Ericaaa!”

Erica was sitting up in bed when her mother burst in and threw her arms around her, sobbing. Erica stared down at the other woman, momentarily dumbfounded. “I’m all right, Mom.”

They were the only two in the room. With no one around to disturb them, they were free to speak as their past selves.

Uncle must have engineered this, Erica thought. As she thought of Leon, she found herself awfully happy to know he was just the way he’d been described to her.

Tears streamed down Marie’s face as she gazed up. “Erica, I’m so glad you’re all right.”

“You’re being melodramatic. I was just a bit worn out.”

“Because you always push yourself!” Marie chided. “You should have stayed in the ship.”

“I told everyone I would be going, so I did. But more importantly, how was the dungeon?”

Due to the illness that afflicted Erica in this world, Marie was forever worrying over her. In this way, her behavior was perfectly maternal. Physically, they were

only a couple of years apart; mentally, the gap was far greater, and Erica was also holding the mature end of the stick, having far outlived Marie. Even so, Marie couldn't help mothering her.

Erica pressed her hand against Marie's back.

"Big Bro won all by himself," Marie explained in a huff. "He's a big cheater. He knew about some secret passage all along, but he didn't breathe a word about it to me! He even tried to fool his fiancées just so he could claim victory for himself. He's wrong in the head, I swear." As Marie regaled Erica with this tale of Leon's underhanded cunning, her face ran the gamut of every emotion.

Erica couldn't help but be amused. She burst into giggles, her laughter as elegant as one would expect of a princess.

Marie tilted her head. "What is it?"

"It's just a bit funny, Mom. It reminds me of how things used to be. Remember? You used to tell me about Uncle all the time."

Marie faltered for a moment, trying to dig through her memories. She didn't recall sharing those stories. "D-did I really? I don't remember. Did I really talk about him that much?"

"You did. On days when you came home drunk, you often spoke about him. You'd fantasize about how things would be if he were still alive, all while telling me he was an absolute scumbag. That sort of thing. And at the end, you would always say..."

I want to see him again.

Erica had often heard these words just before her mother passed out, too wasted to keep her eyes open. Marie had forgotten these episodes, and hearing them recounted now made her face go red.

"Th-th-that's just... I mean, I... You know..." Marie stammered, too flustered to form a coherent argument. "I-I only wanted to see him again so I could work him to the bone! So, um, it's not like it sounds!" Her anxious attempts to deny it only made her look more like a child.

Erica looked at her with maternal fondness. "I'm so glad you were able to see

him again in the end.”

Marie grimaced and dropped her gaze. Her eyes welled with sadness. Erica was stunned by this reaction, but Marie genuinely felt sorry for all the trouble she caused Leon. “I think he maybe wishes we hadn’t reunited.”

“Really? To me it seems like he enjoys having you around.”

“That’s only because he’s always smiling like a total idiot. He never shares his true feelings. Erica, listen to me, you’d better never marry a rotten guy like—ah!” Marie cut herself off abruptly, and her face fell. She had just remembered hearing of Erica’s engagement.

“You’ve said nothing to offend me,” Erica assured her.

Marie shot to her feet. “I don’t believe that’s true!” she said, voice shrill. “You won’t get to marry someone for love. How can you sit there and act like everything is fine?! Not to mention, the Frazers...”

Marie’s knowledge of the game series was shaky at best, but she remembered more than a few details of the third installment. She knew exactly what Elijah Rapha Frazer looked like, which was why she was so distraught by her daughter’s engagement.

“I can’t blame you for being worried, but unlike in the game, Elijah really isn’t a bad person.”

“I don’t buy it! In the game, Elijah was a total sycophant! And on top of that, he was ugly as a horse’s a—wait. Erica, don’t tell me you played the game?” Marie gawked.

“Indeed, I did. You left it lying around, so when I found the time, I played a bit here and there. It was entertaining.”

“Oh. I didn’t realize... But if you’ve seen the story, then you should know better!” Marie thought this was just more proof that she was right, but Erica simply shook her head.

“Mother...” Erica’s expression hardened with resolve. “I’ve reincarnated as the princess of a kingdom—this is my responsibility.”

“Responsibility? But...”

“Perhaps it would be more correct to say I possessed her,” Erica mused. “Regardless of how one defines the phenomenon, the fact remains that I am Holfort’s princess. Naturally, I have a responsibility to uphold.”

Erica was well aware of her position and the duties it entailed. She furthermore understood the function of marriage in that context.

“My marriage to Elijah is political, something outside the realm of concern in our previous lives. This union will bring comfort to a great number of people.”

“Who cares about other people!” Marie cried.

“I wouldn’t, if I were a commoner. But I reiterate: I am the princess of a kingdom. I am obligated to protect my country and her people.”

“But even so...” Marie couldn’t help trying to muster another protest.

Erica’s lips cracked into an enormous smile as she did her best to comfort her mother. “That’s why you have no reason to worry. Elijah is *kind*.”

“He’s...kind?”

“I realize that in the game he had a dreadful personality, and that he was an overweight, ugly man besides. But the Elijah I know did his best to trim down, and he did it for me. He’s only a little chubby now, and I find it absolutely adorable.”

“But you deserve the handsomest man.”

Erica shook her head. “You really put too much stock in looks. Everyone ages—we all turn into wrinkled prunes. What matters is character and whether the person you choose will be dependable.” Erica had lived to a ripe old age once before, and her words seemed to have quite an effect on Marie. To wit, they made her fret about her own future.

Marie cradled her head in her hands as she muttered, “You have a point about the age thing... And are those boys remotely dependable in any way whatsoever? I’m already worried that they’ve all got some serious character flaws, but...at this rate, when I get older...”

Anxiety about the coming decades crashed over Marie like a relentless wave.

“I-I’m sure everything will be fine,” Erica tried to say, unable to just sit and

watch as her mother fell into full panic mode. “You have my uncle at your side, and your boys aren’t bad people.”

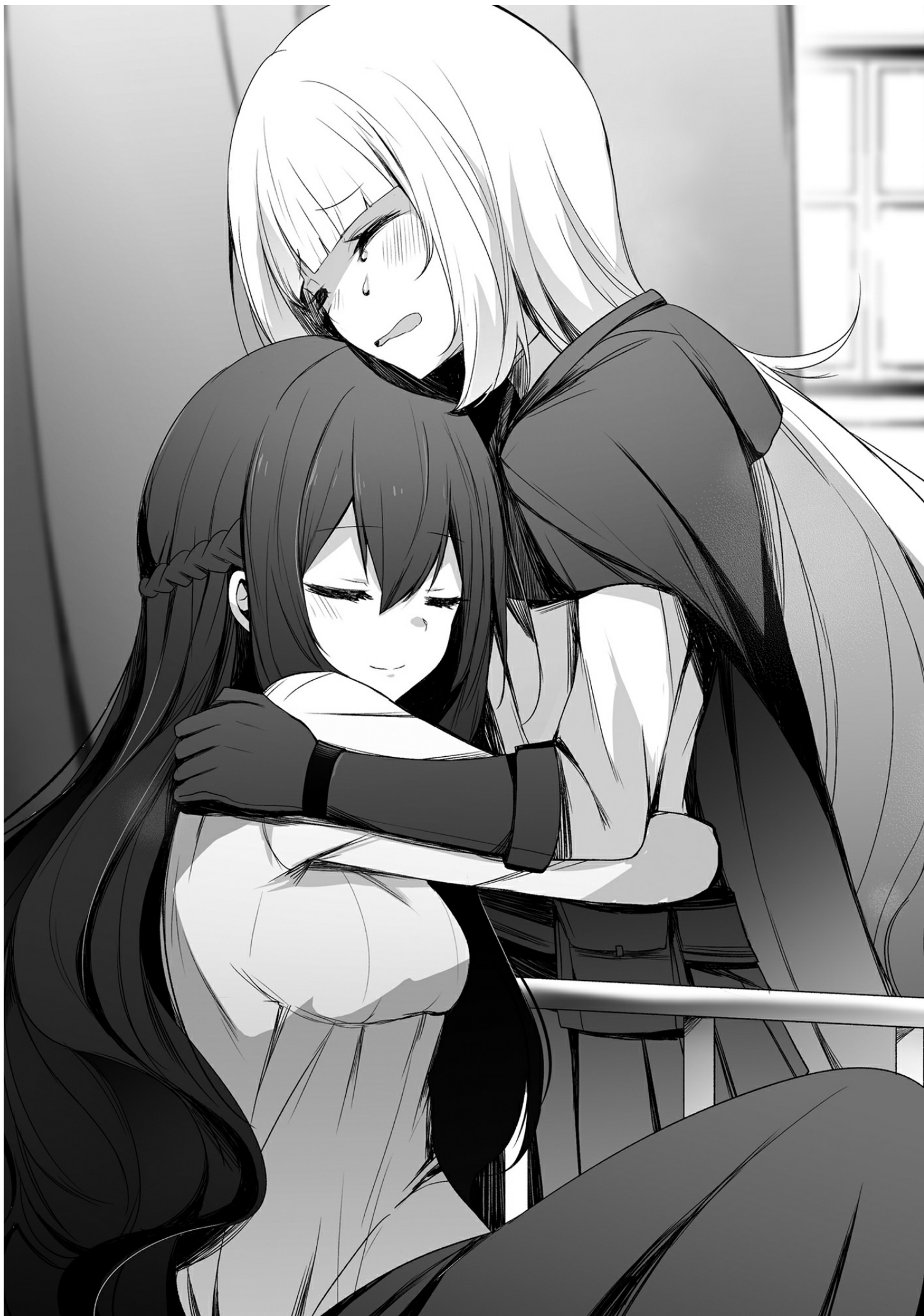
Marie lifted her gaze. She stared at her daughter with true gravity as she asked, “And what about Jilk?”

“I-I’m sorry.” Erica did at least seem to grasp that Jilk was more or less irredeemable. “I don’t even know what to say about him.”

With that, they were both out of sorts. Marie did seem conscious of the fact that she had been the engineer of her own downfall. “W-well, anyway,” she said, hands on her hips, “I’m sure if you say it’ll be all right, it will. You always had a much better head on your shoulders than me. I’m always screwing up. I wasn’t even able to gain my independence this time.” She laughed dryly, honestly convinced she was a hopeless case. Tears welled at the corners of her eyes.

Erica wrapped her arms around her mother and squeezed. “That’s not true. I’m so, so glad to have met you, Mom. And I’m sorry to have made you push yourself so much for my sake.”

“I... I just...! I wanted to finally act like a real mom! That’s why... That’s why I...!” Marie broke into tears, her body trembling as she clung to her daughter.



“Master, why do you suppose Marie was after the treasure?” Luxion asked me.

“Huh?”

After Marie had taken off for the sickbay, I’d retreated to my room and locked myself in. There, Luxion had begun interrogating me.

“I’m merely pointing out that, given her situation, there’s no reason for her to go to such lengths. You willingly act as her guardian, so there are no dire financial straits compelling her actions. Thus I find it odd she would decry the honor afforded to her by involvement with this affair all because she failed to claim a share of the treasure. What was it she truly wished for?”

From a logical standpoint, Luxion was totally right.

I flipped over on the bed so I could face him. “It’s because Erica’s her daughter.”

“That does not answer my question.”

“Sure it does. She’s stumbled upon her daughter from her previous life. Why’s it so crazy to think she’d want to be someone her daughter could be proud of?”

“You mean to claim that is her entire motivation for seeking independence?” Luxion asked, still too skeptical of my reasoning. “I fail to comprehend. She will benefit a great deal more by remaining under your care; you see that her every need is met.” He was, in fact, so unconvinced that he started grasping at other explanations. “If we factor in her personality matrix, is it not more likely that she’s desperate to ensure her future should you cut her off?”

“You haven’t given her feelings any thought at all, have you?”

“Her *feelings*? Master, are we not discussing Marie? The girl who so readily drains you of every drop of your financial support?”

I shrugged. “I mean, you’re not wrong. But she went ages without realizing her daughter was in the game, you know? By then, she’d set her path: She managed to seduce all the love interests from the first game and tried to install herself as the Saint. That wouldn’t have been so bad if she’d known how the first game ended. But now she’s been labeled a fake by society.”

“Indeed. Her lack of forethought reminds me of you, Master. Your past kinship is unsurprising in that respect.”

I scowled at him. “Hey, I think things through way more than Marie does.”

“Are you sure you aren’t turning a blind eye to your true nature?”

“Oh, put a sock in it! The point is, while she’s had to pay the price for her foolhardiness, she’s also landed herself in my care. Except *now* she doesn’t want her daughter to see her leaning on me for every little thing.”

In fact, she probably wanted to look like a proper mom who had everything together. She was haunted by the screw ups of her last life, which had left her with regrets about not being a proper parent.

“Yeah,” I muttered to myself. “She probably wants to make amends for the past. So she wanted to seem like a good mom just this once.”

“You realized all this and still hid the existence of that secret passage from her?”

“That has nothing to do with this.”

“You really are callous, Master.”

I understood perfectly well that Marie had wanted to find the treasure so she could stand on her own two feet and look like the best mom ever to Erica. There was just one problem with that. Namely, she still had her litter of lamebrains to look after. Even if she’d been the sole person to claim the prize, her winnings would have barely paid off the debts her dolts had accrued. She wouldn’t be in the red anymore, but only because she’d be at zero.

“Eh, it’s better for her not to not get too full of herself,” I reasoned.

Having finally comprehended what I was getting at, Luxion spun in a clockwise circle. I wasn’t entirely sure what meaning he was trying to convey.

“I now understand Marie’s motivations. However, in the process, I have discovered something new that escapes my comprehension,” Luxion said.

“What’s that?”

“How is it that you can understand Marie’s feelings so thoroughly while being

utterly oblivious to the feelings of the women to whom you are engaged? To be clear, I do not mean this as a joke. I am genuinely puzzled.”

Oof. Way to hit me where it hurts. I grimaced. “If I really understood women’s feelings, I’d have had a way easier time in life.”

Luxion moved his eye up and down thoughtfully, as if nodding. “You are indeed oblivious.”

“Do you really have to do me dirty like that?”

“If my words wound, it is only because I learned from watching you, Master.”

What, so now he was claiming I was the reason he was such a nasty piece of work? *No, that can’t be true. He was a condescending jerk from day one, right?*

“Anyway, Marie’s not a woman in my head. She’s just a little sister.”

In my personal dictionary, a little sister was more contemptible than anything else; it was an enemy sitting right under your nose.

Also, Marie and I had been together since we were children. I couldn’t say I could read her like a book exactly, but I could more or less pick up on what she was feeling. That was especially true on a day like today, when I could see both her fluster and her panic.

“Angie, Livia, and Noelle are amazing women—unlike Marie. It’s rude to lump them in with her.”

“I believe Marie would have some choice words for you if she heard that,” said Luxion.

I flipped over on the bed, turning my back to Luxion. “Whatever, how’s Erica?”

“Perfectly fine at the moment. A more detailed examination would yield a finer analysis as to her condition, but at present, we lack the time to conduct one.”

Those examinations really were time-consuming, which was why we had yet to run one on Erica or Mia. We’d just finished basic checks thus far.

“When summer break begins, we’ll do those examinations. I already got

Mylene's permission. How soon can we expect results?" I asked.

"That all depends on Cleare, as she will be responsible for analyzing the gathered data."

I could only hope we discovered the mystery underlying the illness that plagued both Erica and Mia. Only then could we hope to cure it. But as long as I had Luxion and Cleare, I was sure we could find some way to deal with it.

Just as I was about to nod off into asleep, Luxion's sharp voice woke me up. "Master, a suspicious ship is approaching the *Einhorn*. It appears, strangely enough, to be unmanned."

My jaw dropped. "Huh?"

Chapter 10:

The Ghost Ship

I RACED OUT ON DECK. Angie beat me there. She had changed into more casual clothes and was clutching the railing as she gazed at the eerie ship drifting toward us.

The whole thing was in shambles. It was kind of a miracle that it could even move. Moreover, the design was ancient. It had a sail, which wasn't altogether unusual in the current era—ships often used sails to catch wind to aid propulsion. However, it lacked the characteristics typical of most modern airships. Its shape was super outdated—more boxy than aerodynamic.

“What century is that thing even from?” I asked.

“I assume it must be several hundred years old. If you desire a more thorough analysis, we will need to board to examine it closer.”

I quickly shook my head. “Hell no, we are not getting on that thing. You can tell at a glance—that is absolutely a ghost ship.”

Part of the vessel had been destroyed, and since it was made of wood, it creaked eerily as it moved through the air. If that wasn't bad enough, the sky was growing dark and was peppered with black clouds—the same kind that appeared when monsters showed up. The ship was practically screaming “haunted as all get-out.”

Nope. Nuh-uh. Not for me.

It wasn't until I made my way to the railing that Angie noticed me and said, “Leon, what do you make of that vessel?”

I assumed she was asking me why it would be floating out here of all places and shrugged, not giving it much thought. “Probably just some ancient ship that had one too many bad turns and was set adrift. So, uh, we're good to leave it, right?”

“If possible, it would be best to recover it. Unfortunately, it looks too fragile

to tow back to the capital. That said, I'm surprised. Never did I imagine I'd get to see this type of ship in motion."

"Huh? Wait, do you know what it is?" My eyes widened.

"I do," she said. "We have a miniature version at home."

This was the first I'd heard of it, but it seemed the Redgraves decorated their home with miniatures of old airships. *Guess it's a rich people hobby or something?*

"I didn't see that coming. Is its design supposed to be good?"

Angie shook her head. "No, this line was cheap and mass-produced. From what I hear, it was terribly uncomfortable and often fell prey to storms."

"That sounds awful."

What a crappy ship. At the same time, that made it even more of a miracle that this thing had continued to drift without sinking when it had gone unmanned for so many years. It might have impressed me, if it hadn't looked so damn unsettling.

"Today has been one wonder after another," Angie said, not sharing my distaste for this unwanted visitor. "I never dreamed I'd see one of the ships our ancestors sailed upon with my own eyes."

"Ancestors? Wait... What? Your ancestors rode that thing?!" I thrust a finger at it in disbelief.

Angie gave me a confused smile. "You mean you didn't know? This is the type of ship our ancestors used to migrate to the continent where they founded Holfort."

I gaped. "Seriously?!" I didn't know squat about all this.

"Prior to the kingdom's founding, it's said that numerous settlers flooded the new land. The ships responsible for carrying them there were identical to the one you see before you. They were preferred for cheap production cost and ability to haul vast loads of cargo. I truly didn't think I would ever get to see one for myself, to say nothing of one still capable of flight."

I peeled my gaze from Angie and looked back at the ship. It still looked creepy

and uninviting. Unlike her, I wasn't particularly moved by the thought of our ancestors' grand sojourns in that rickety old thing.

Luxion's lens lit up as he conducted an analysis of the ship. "It appears the vessel has become host to a number of monsters."

"And that's how it managed to survive, hm?" Angie nodded to herself. "How ironic. If the ship hadn't been overrun by monsters, I would never have had the opportunity to see it."

I clutched the railing and studied Angie's profile. "You seem really happy."

She glanced at me and smiled sadly. "I suspect it's because I'll never forget this day. I got to overcome the trials of a dungeon, and then I laid eyes on a ship most people will never glimpse. I'm sure today will live on in my memories forever."

There was a long pause, and then...

"Leon, I love you."

"Huh? Oh, right."

"That's why I don't want to be a burden."

"A burden? But..." I started, but Angie interrupted.

"This is as far as we go." Angie had already made up her mind, and my input didn't matter. "I'm glad I was able to go on an adventure with you. I can keep myself going with this memory."

"What? Why?!" The words tumbled out of my mouth. I was so shaken—so confused.

Meanwhile, the ghost ship continued its approach.

"The ship itself has become a monster," Luxion observed. "Given its current trajectory, I surmise it is attempting to make contact with the *Einhorn*. Master, permission to open fire."

"Not right now!" I snapped at him. "Angie, I have *never* thought of you as a burden."

"Perhaps not yet, but you will soon," Angie said. Although she looked happy

to have my reassurance, her resolve was firm. “As long as I stay with you, you’ll never reach the life you desire. My father and brother are serious in their desire to drag you into the growing conflict. I suspect their long-term aim is to make Luxion’s power the foundation of our house.”

She was probably talking in terms of generations. Whatever children Angie and I produced would inherit Luxion, and House Redgrave planned to intermarry with our line in such a way that they would have sole access to his powers, to use at their discretion. Vince and his son weren’t just thinking about their lifetime—they were looking toward the future they could craft.

This line of thinking annoyed Luxion. “My master is the only person I have deemed worthy of giving me orders. I cannot guarantee who I will serve in the future.”

“That doesn’t matter. My father and Gilbert are convinced of their own logic, and so the result will be the same in the end. Leon will not be able to live the peaceful life he hopes for. That’s why it will be best if I leave his side.”

I had no idea Angie had put so much thought into my future. It was true that I regularly complained that I yearned for a more peaceful, ordinary life, but I’d never dreamed Angie was suffering trying to make that happen.

No. The problem was that I’d never opened my eyes to see the truth.

“I... I...” I stretched my hand toward her as I stuttered, but she pulled back and away.

“You should live your life more freely. I only ask that you take care of Livia... and Noelle too. As long as you have them, you won’t be lonely, right?” Angie grinned, looking nigh mischievous.

I couldn’t find the words. I was speechless. Sure, there were platitudes—attempts to smooth over the situation. Excuses were my forte. If I wanted, I could spew any number of clichéd, embarrassing vows to keep her from leaving me. Things like “I need you in my life,” or “I swear I won’t let you go.”

But I knew those would ring hollow to her ears.

I dropped my gaze.

Finally, the realization hit me.

“Ha ha. I’m being dumped.”

Our relationship was over.

Angie shook her head. “That’s not it. I’m the one who broke our promise to be together. I am the only one at fault. You haven’t done anything wrong.”

Maybe I couldn’t take credit for everything that had gone awry, but at the very least, it was my fault that Angie felt so cornered. My focus was always on people as individuals. Angie’s was on her family as a unit. Our values totally diverged. I’d failed to understand that, and now I was facing the consequences for dropping the ball.

I knew it. I knew this was going to happen.

I just couldn’t measure up to a woman like her.

“Angie, I...”

I opened my mouth to at least say some final words, but I was interrupted when something crashed into the *Einhorn*. The ship rocked violently. Angie looked like she was about to topple over, so I lunged, wrapping my arms around her.

“What happened?!” I demanded, scanning the area. It was then that I noticed the ghost ship had hit us. Worse, undead clad in tattered pirate outfits now stood on its deck, staring right this way. They slowly shambled toward us.

“What the? Hey, Luxion!”

How could he have let this happen?

Luxion seemed to sense the anger in my voice. “Master, you were the one who failed to give me permission to fire,” he said promptly. “The more pressing matter, however, is that we are in danger of being boarded by the undead.”

Okay, yeah! So maybe I kind of brushed you off. But still!

“You always figure out some way to manage without my direct orders! Dammit! Tell everyone to grab their weapons!”

“I have already raised the alarm within the ship,” he said.

“Great. Next, we’ll have the *Einhorn*—”

“It is impossible to return fire when we have already been boarded.”

“*What?*”

“I said it is impossible.”

My plan was to blast the stupid ghost ship out of the sky with our cannons, but it seemed that option went out the window once they were on top of us. Great. Now what?

“What should we do then?” Angie asked, still locked in my embrace.

“You should infiltrate the ship, just the two of you. If you can eliminate the creature possessing the ship, we will be able to safely extract ourselves from this situation.”

Yeah, uh, problem is...I’ve got no weapons! Nor did Angie, for that matter.

“Okay. Call up the idiot brigade. We’ll also need—”

“There’s no time,” Luxion interrupted. “You two must take care of this. I have already prepared weapons.”

Several of the worker robots filed out of the *Einhorn*, carrying equipment. I was starting to feel like something suspicious was going on; Luxion was a little *too* well prepared.

Angie and I pulled apart and took our preferred equipment. There was a shotgun, a machine gun, and some pistols and swords, among other things.

“I have not detected any monsters that would prove particularly dangerous. All you need do is enter and defeat the monster controlling the ship, and this situation will be resolved.”

Everything Luxion said sounded simple enough...until I realized there was a catch.

“Huh? Hold on a sec. The two of us? What about you?”

“I have other work to attend to, so I am afraid I am unable to accompany you.”

“No, you need to come. Leave whatever you’ve got for Cleare,” I ordered.

“No,” Luxion insisted. His eye wandered to the monsters now attempting to board the *Einhorn*. “The enemy is upon us. Make haste, if you please.”

Shotgun in hand, I whipped around to deal with this mess, though not without throwing one last complaint at Luxion. “Screw you and your ‘work.’ I’ll remember this.”

Angie hefted the machine gun and breathed a small sigh. “Well, it isn’t a very large ship. We should be more than enough. Leon, let’s go take care of this.”

We took off together, leaving Luxion behind.

Unbeknownst to me, he murmured—quietly enough that we couldn’t hear—“Good luck to the both of you. You’ll need it.”

Livia raced out onto the deck in a panic. That was where she discovered Luxion, accompanied by a number of robots—suits of Armor, or the top halves of them. They were facing off with the monsters trying to invade the *Einhorn*, and they dispensed with them as easily as if this were a daily chore.

The sight gave Livia a sinking feeling, but she shook her head. *No, it’s not time to think about that. Right now, confirming Mr. Leon’s safety is the priority.*

“Lux!” Livia plucked up her courage and called out.

Luxion turned, his red lens fixing on her. “Olivia, I believe I ordered everyone to stay inside.”

“I can’t find Mr. Leon or Angie! I’m worried something might have happened to them, but Cleary’s clammed up.”

Everyone else had gathered in the main hall. No one was particularly happy, being ordered to sit by and do nothing, but they had done as Luxion asked. The only people missing were Leon and Angie. Worried for their safety, Livia had ventured on deck to search for them. It struck her as odd that Luxion seemed totally unaffected by their absence.

It’s...scary, she thought. Her mind went back to that dream in which she had watched as Luxion massacred people by the thousands. The sight had been so vivid, so graphic. Try as she might to forget, the terror refused to diminish.

“They are fine,” Luxion said.

“But!”

“They need this.”

Luxion offered her no further explanation.

The others were gathered in the *Einhorn*’s mess hall. They were restless. Weapons in hand, they peered out the window as they gauged the situation.

Jake folded his arms. “It’s only a ghost ship. We could have ended this by firing a couple of cannons.”

Erin stood beside him; the moment he complained, she was already pacifying him. “But I hear there can be treasure on ghost ships. Perhaps they’re investigating the possibility?”

“Really? Then since we lost at the old fortress, we should get on board and take the prize for ourselves.” Jake’s motivation was renewed at the promise of treasure.

“You’re always so confident, Your Highness,” said Oscar. “Me, I’ve heard so many terrifying stories about ghost ships that I think I’d choose to run rather than fire.”

“You’re supposedly my foster brother, and yet you’re such a coward,” Jake scoffed.

Oscar’s eyes widened. “You mean you don’t know the stories? Allow me to regale you with a few...”

That sparked a round of ghost-ship stories among the first-years. As Oscar recounted the tales, Jake’s face gradually paled.

Finn watched with narrowed eyes and a frown, scoring the men based on their behavior. *Jake and Oscar... It’s as I feared. I can’t entrust Mia to either one of them. They’re wasting time chattering about nonsense. Not that it would matter either way; they’re too friendly with other women, which already makes them both poor choices.*

As for Erin, she wasn't even in the running anymore. Finn gave all three love interests failing marks.

Oblivious to Finn's inner monologue, Mia was unsettled by the horrible new topic the first-years had landed on. She glanced at Finn. "Sir Knight, do ghost ships really exist? I'm scared."

"There's nothing for you to be afraid of." Finn gave her a reassuring look. "I will protect you. Don't worry. Kurosuke and I could take down a ship like that in no time."

"Yep, you got it!" Brave agreed.

Finn stayed close by Mia's side and gently took her hand in his. Her cheeks instantly colored.

"Mia, do you have a cold?" he asked, panicked. "Why is it you never tell me when you're feeling unwell? Wait right here. I'll get some medicine for you. Kurosuke, fetch her a blanket and a couch to lie on."

"Partner, sometimes you are a serious idiot," Brave said.

Finn really did think that Mia's bright-red face indicated she was sick. It was hard for Brave to stand by and say nothing, exasperated as he was by Finn's cluelessness.

Mia threw her hands up, waving them vigorously. "No, that's not it! Please don't worry. I'm not sick!"

"No, you might not have realized it yourself. You know? In any case, I can't have you return to your room yet, but you should at least lie down."

As always, Finn was being a mother hen—hugely overprotective. Even Mia was pretty conflicted about that tendency.

"I-I'm glad you're so worried about me, Sir Knight, but I wish you'd be more..."

"What? Whatever it is, please tell me."

"Urk..." Mia groaned, dropping her gaze. "Dummy."

Finn's jaw dropped. The shock hit him like an electric current, shooting straight through his body. He was paralyzed. *She... She hates meeeee! Where*

did I go wrong?!



Angie and I stormed the ghost ship. There was just one tiny problem.

"I can't move another step."

I planted my butt firmly on the floor.

Angie gave me an aggrieved look. Still hefting the machine gun, she sighed deeply and thrust a finger toward something on the ground. That was where, moments ago, a monster had collapsed and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Leon, that monster was a ghost type that physical attacks can't touch. You don't have to worry. You could have taken it out easily with magic."

Not long after we entered the ship, we'd been assailed by a ghost-type monster. Scared half to death, I had unloaded my shotgun on it, only for the bullets to pass right through. Angie had killed it quickly with her fire magic, but not before my last shreds of courage deserted me.

"I can't do it. My legs gave out."

"Are you *kidding* me?! What happened to the man who landed the killing blow on that fiendish boss?!" Angie could scarcely hide her shock and disbelief at my cowardice.

Logically, I understood what that monster had been, its strengths and weaknesses. The problem was that it was like a real, *actual* ghost. I mean, a legit *ghost*-ghost. I had felt the animosity wafting from its form, and its attacks had been as eerie as they were bone-chilling. It had been fine in the game because it hadn't looked realistic. But right here, right now? These things were the real deal.

"I'm scared of enemies I can't hit with regular attacks! I'm not good with ghosts!" I shouted, finally confessing.

"I knew you didn't care for the undead, but I didn't realize it was this bad."

When I lived in Japan, I'd done my damndest to avoid any movies, images, or articles relating to scary stories. And if someone was actually *telling* a horror story? Oh, I gave those people a *wiiide* berth. Tests of courage?

Incomprehensible. I did whatever it took not to participate. Sometimes I was

dragged screaming into one for school events, but I spent the whole time cursing the names of whatever dumbass school officials thought it was a brilliant idea to send us to supposedly haunted areas in the name of “testing our courage.”

“I can’t walk another step,” I declared.

Angie slapped a hand to her forehead. “Fine. I’ll put down the monsters. You wait here until—”

“You mean you’re going to leave me by myself?!”

“H-hey, let go. Leon, please, stop clinging to my leg.”

I ignored her protests and stuck to her limb like a barnacle.

Angie looked half-troubled and half-pleased to see this side of me. “I guess you’re afraid of some things too.”

“Please don’t leave me here,” I squeaked, clinging to her leg for dear life.

Angie reached down and patted me on the head. It seemed she felt she couldn’t just abandon me. As if to reassure me, she said in a calm, gentle voice, “Let’s rest here for a moment, then we’ll go on together. I’ll take care of things this time. You stay behind me.”

“Okay.”

To me, in that moment, Angie looked like an angel. It was such a relief knowing I could depend on her at a time like this.

The interior of the ship was just as aged and worn as the exterior. Beneath our weight, the floorboards creaked and threatened to break if we took a single wrong step. The doors crumbled when we tested them. Oh, and also the place was crawling with monsters.

We found traces of the people who had occupied the ship before it became a host to ghosts and undead. In one room, a number of old books were sitting on a desk. Most were so worn and faded that they were impossible to read. Only one had legible text, and then only barely.

“These were the private quarters of a sailor,” Angie said as she read the book. I clung to her back, casting a wary glance around the room.

If someone had once lived here, there was every possibility that a strong emotion or desire still clung to the place. I was terrified that it might assume the form of a ghoul or whatever and lunge out at us.

“Angie, let’s hurry up and finish so we can get back,” I said anxiously.

She frowned at me and flipped through the book’s pages. Some were readable, while others were so stiff and worn that they crumbled under her touch. “Are you really this bad at dealing with the undead? Even after all you’ve been through?”

“How does any of my experience prepare me to deal with all this? Aren’t you even a little scared, Angie?”

“No. Living humans are far more frightening than the dead.”

“Oh,” I muttered. “Marie said the same thing once.”

“What’s that? Bringing up another woman’s name at a time like this? I suppose you must *want* me to leave you behind.”

Fearful that I had angered her, I threw my arms around Angie, clinging desperately.

Angie’s cheeks heated as she stuttered, “L-Leon, I was just kidding. Don’t smother me. Hey, where are you putting your hands?!”

“Forgive me! I can’t do scary stuff!”

I wouldn’t have been in such a sorry state if that jerk hadn’t abandoned me. Were Luxion here, he would have found some way to pave my way out of Terrorville. Being able to joke about how unscientific ghosts were, or even trading barbs, would have lightened the atmosphere. Not having that option exacerbated my fear.

I mean, the dungeon I had to get through to obtain him was pretty terrifying in itself. There were human bones everywhere. I would never have taken the initiative to get through that place if my life hadn’t been on the line.

Angie flipped another page. “I’ve learned more about this ship. It was

attempting to transport adventurers to the continent where Holfort was founded.”

“Adventurers, huh?”

“It seems many young people who dreamed of the new world came aboard. The owner of this log wrote a number of complaints, annoyed by their ‘primitive’ behavior.”

“Okay,” I said, “but what’s that have to do with how this ship ended up?”

“It’s possible it was abandoned. Though according to this log, they found treasure. Also, the writer seems to have been a woman. The back pages are filled with wistful remarks about longing for someone—though it doesn’t indicate who.”

A lover maybe?

Angie examined the book’s cover and brushed her hand against it. “Even after looking through all the pages, I couldn’t find the writer’s name. There was nothing about the ship’s name either. If the log’s condition were a little better, I probably could have found something.”

“L-Let’s just wrap this up and get outta here. I’ll have Luxion and Cleare look into the ship later.”

“You really aren’t any good with ghosts, are you?” Angie shook her head. “You’re supposed to be the Hero of Holfort. What would people think if they saw how terrified you are? Your admirers would be devastated.”

“Who cares! *Ghosts are scary.*”

Angie set the log aside and started out of the room. Most of the other rooms were partially caved in, making them impossible to enter. We headed down the main corridor, which was just as ruined as the rest of the ship, and made our way deeper inside.

Suddenly, Angie came to a stop. “This is it, Leon.” She held out her hand expectantly. I gave her one of the holy water explosives. At present, I was more or less her equipment mule.

Once Angie had what she needed, I moved back and held my shotgun at the

ready. My hands shivered so violently, I wasn't sure I could actually hope to hit anything.

Angie slammed her foot against the door before us, breaking it down. Inside was the slime-like monster that had possessed the ship. The bigger issue, however, were the many ghosts and phantoms surrounding it.

"I knew it, more ghosts!" I wailed at the top of my lungs.

Angie tossed the grenade. The explosion scattered droplets of holy water everywhere. A swathe of ghosts writhed in anguish before disappearing with a puff of smoke. Those that remained charged.

Terror tore through me. I tried firing, but of course, my bullets went right through our foes. Meanwhile, Angie unloaded her machine gun on the slime beast.

"As soon as I finish this thing off, I'll come help you, Leon. Just wait for me."

I threw out my right hand, intending to cast a spell, but my fear got the best of me. I couldn't concentrate the mana necessary to summon magic.

"Angie, save meeee!"

"I told you, just wait a second!"

The ghosts dodged my feeble attacks, encroaching ever closer until they were nearly upon me. Their inhuman voices snaked into my ears, murmuring words I couldn't make out. Not that it mattered what they said—I was scared out of my mind already.

My skin was pure goosebumps. Cold beads of sweat poured down my back. "Luxion, save me!" I shrieked, desperate to escape. I'd never imagined that, in my moment of need, I would call for that hateful jerk of all people, but at least that was better than calling for my mom.

Angie managed to finish off the slime beast before turning her flames on the monsters surrounding me. She swiftly eliminated every last one of them. "This is why I told you to wait!"

A thin wisp of smoke rose from the barrel of her machine gun as she approached, flames at her back. She had never looked so...*dependable*.

Angie scooped me up, almost like a princess. “The flames spread quicker than I thought. Hold on tight. We’re getting out of here.”

“Okay.”

As Angie cradled me against her, I looped my arms around her neck for extra security.

Angie slammed her foot into the wall, creating an exit for us. I could already see the *Einhorn*’s deck from here.

“This was all set up a little too perfectly. Once I have a moment, I’m going to wring some answers out of Luxion,” Angie muttered under her breath as she hopped outside, agilely making her way back to the *Einhorn* with me still in her arms.



The flames began to swallow the ghost ship behind us. Once we safely returned, the *Einhorn* pulled away from it. Angie was still holding me as she glanced back at it.

“I never wanna see another ghost ship in my life,” I said. Logically, I understood that ghosts and undead were just monsters like any other, but their whole vibe was just too much for me.

“I entirely agree,” said Angie “I never dreamed you would be so utterly useless. If it’s going to be such a pain, I don’t want to see another ghost ship again either.”

“Sorry,” I murmured dejectedly.

Livia rushed over the moment she saw us. Luxion—the stupid jerk—followed close behind her.

“Mr. Leon! Angie! Um...what an odd position.” Livia glanced between us, bemused.

“I can quite easily imagine how this happened,” Luxion said, betraying no emotion.

I glowered at him, still clinging to Angie’s neck. She was distracted by the ghost ship, which was gradually receding. As the flames continued to devour it, debris fell away.

“I only wish I could have looked around a bit more,” Angie said wistfully.

Back in my room, I perched on my bed with my legs pulled to my chest and trembled violently. Luxion and Cleare observed me with great amusement.

“You seem to be terribly afraid.”

“Aw, Master, you’re just too cute!”

I glared at them. “Shut up, you backstabbers! How could you let something like a ghost ship come that close to the *Einhorn*? Don’t you usually open fire on something like that even without my permission? Or could it be you set this up on purpose, huh?!”

The more I thought about it, the fishier this whole thing smelled. At first blush, I'd honestly believed that the ghost ship had been the one to approach us. However, knowing Luxion and Cleare, they would have had every opportunity to prevent it from getting so close. The oddities didn't stop there—it was *also* bizarre that Luxion had directed Angie and I to storm the ship by ourselves. Why couldn't we have waited to rendezvous with the others before boarding? Actually, Luxion could have taken care of it all by himself. There was no reason we should have gone it alone like we did. Angie had realized all this too, which was why she had muttered about interrogating Luxion.

In short, I was convinced the robots had been scheming.

"Have you only just realized?" Luxion asked. "This was our plan to get you and Angelica alone."

"What crap is this about a 'plan,' huh?! You know perfectly well how much I hate ghosts!"

Cleare bobbed up and down. "That's why we were sure it'd be an effective ploy!"

"That's it, I'm gonna give the both of you an earful."

The AIs immediately turned around and zipped toward the exit; they had installed a perfectly round hole for themselves to maneuver through and escape at will.

"H-hey, h-hold on a sec!" I called after them.

Cleare spun around. "Just so ya know, you oughta give up on asking anyone to come keep you company. I dunno how it started, but the rest of the group are in the main hall trading ghost stories. Probably better you don't go. You'd just have to hear all those creepy tales you hate so much."

"What were those morons doing while we were gone?!"

"Oh, and I had Liv and Nelly go there too. *Buuuut*, Angie's headed this way—to finish the talk you were having about breaking things off!"

Way to throw a bucket of ice on my head.

"Oh, yeah... I guess we were in the middle of that."

The whole ghost ship ordeal had kind of interrupted us. Part of me didn't want to address the elephant in the room—wanted to just leave it at that—but I knew that was disrespectful. Things had been bound to come to a head like this.

"That's right. She dumped me. It's what I deserve." I hung my head and sighed.

"I can see you're trying to act all tough, but after seeing how pathetic you looked on that ship? Yeaah. Nothing you do is gonna help," said Cleare.

My head shot back up. "Hey, hold it right there. Don't tell me you two were watching the whole time!"

"Master, you should be more honest with yourself and tell Angie what you really feel," Cleare advised. "None of the flimsy, clichéd lines you use to try to smooth things over. You need to make sure your words come from the heart."

My suspicions only grew when Cleare tried to change the subject.

"Don't blow me off. You guys were watching and laughing at me, weren't you?! Tell the truth!"

"Master, I mean it, you have to tell Angie with your own words how much you love her."

I balled my fists. "Don't try to wriggle out of this by pretending you're giving some great speech!"

Alas, my protestations yielded nothing; Cleare scurried away, leaving me all on my lonesome. With nothing and no one to distract me, every little sound in the room, however slight, made me jump. Suddenly I was shivering again, overwhelmed with terror.

"It's way too messed up that real ghosts are like, real and stuff. What am I supposed to do about that?!"

If a ghost popped out at me in the middle of the night, I'd burst into tears. My knees knocked together as I quivered, so I hugged them even closer. Then a knock fell on the door.

"Leon, it's me."

“Eek!” I squealed. The sound came so suddenly that I nearly jumped out of my skin. When I realized it was Angie, I swiftly gave her permission to enter.

Angie’s hair was still damp, having just gotten out of the shower. She had pinned it behind her head in a simple loop rather than taking the time to braid her usual intricate bun. It made her look more casual and laid-back.

Angie’s lips pulled into a thin, taut line as she looked at me. “Are you still scared? We already defeated those monsters.”

“I’m too scared to sleep. What if I relive the whole thing in my dreams?”

“Try to remember that you’re a hero, would you? Don’t let anyone else see you like this. This is my final warning.” Although Angie had lingered at the threshold, she finally strode inside and plunked herself down on my bed, where she threw her head back and stared up at my ceiling. Her expression was bright and cheerful enough, but...I noticed the skin around her eyes was red and puffy. Had she been crying in the shower?

Even so, she forced herself to smile as she said, “This is the end of the road for us. It was fun while it lasted.”

I knew that if I let things continue on this trajectory, it really would be over. Part of me wanted to take it like a man—to make a clean break so there would be no second guesses later down the line. But another part of me wanted to wail and plead my case.

Who cares whether there’s trouble on the horizon or whatever. That’s just lip service. I don’t wanna break up with you, Angie! And I’m lonely being here by myself, so I want you to stay here and sleep beside me. What, I need to act like more of a man? Who cares! You already saw me make a total fool of myself on the ghost ship. What would be the point of putting on a brave front now?!

As much as I wanted to let my clingy self say those words, a stricter side of me admonished, *You can’t be so spineless. You have no right to trouble her any more than you already have. Just be good and break up with her. Let your memories of each other stay pure and move on.*

On the other hand, it was kinda embarrassing to put on an act at this point.

While I was lost in thought, Angie worriedly glanced at me. “What’s the

matter? I'd prefer it if you said something."

I supposed I wasn't the only anxious one.

"To be totally honest, I didn't—and still don't—really get the whole thing about our houses and status and all that stuff," I said. "In my mind, I was engaged to you as an individual."

"What are you saying?"

I took a deep breath. "What I want isn't the Redgraves and their power. I want *you*, Angie."

"L-Leon..." As Angie's cheeks colored, she stared down at her lap. "I *am* happy to hear you say that, but without my house, I'm a powerless little girl. Without the influence they afford me, I'm of no use to you. I have no choice but to rely on them, and because of that, I'm a burden to you."

"But I...!" My fingernails dug into my palms. It was so *vexing*. Why did someone's house have to hold so much sway over their life? But even if I told Angie again that she was all I wanted, I wouldn't get my meaning across. I knew that, but still, I... "I *need* you, Angie. I'm just a backwater nobleman from the sticks who knows absolutely nothing about noble society. It's too much for me."

"It's true that Livia and Noelle are a bit ignorant when it comes to noble society, but you have the queen's support. If you wanted, you could easily make Princess Erica your wife. Knowing Her Majesty, she would be willing to—"

"No. *Absolutely* not! Erica is the one person I can't marry."

"Why not?!" Angie's jaw dropped, as if she couldn't believe I would so obstinately make such a declaration.

I knew why it was hard to fathom; Erica and I did appear pretty close. I could hardly blame anyone for misunderstanding.

But I would not—*could not*—marry Erica. That would be way too gross. She was my niece, for crying out loud! I wanted her to be happy, yeah, but I wasn't going to be the one to make her happy. Not in *that* capacity.

"I want *you*," I reiterated. "Badly enough that I'd be willing to pick a fight with the Redgraves to have you."

“For a woman? Leon, do you hear yourself?”

“If I have to, I’ll steal you away.”

“You dummy.” A smile teased at the edges of Angie’s lips as she shook her head. Tears welled in her eyes, slowly sliding down her cheeks. “That you feel that way means so much to me. But that would only push your dreams of a peaceful life further and further away. I want you to be *happy*.”

But what do I need to be truly happy? I already knew the answer—which is why I had to tell her... “In that case, I need you.”

“Leon?” I threw my arms around Angie and pulled her close. She slipped an arm around me as well, only to flinch in surprise. “Leon, are you trembling? Are you...?”

“Sorry. I’m still scared.”

She burst out laughing the moment she realized I still hadn’t shaken my terror from our expedition. “You really are a hopeless man. Can’t you pull yourself together for something like this?”



“I can’t help it, that whole thing freaked me out! Please, stay with me.”

Luxion and Cleare had already betrayed me by clearing out. All I could do was beg Angie to stay.

Angie leaned down to whisper in my ear. “So then, are you saying you’re trying to seduce me because you’re too scared to stay in here by yourself tonight?”

“N-no.”

She eyed me doubtfully. “I won’t be mad if you tell the truth. Come on, out with it.” Her warm breath tickled the shell of my ear.

“Just a little,” I admitted.

“I knew it.” Although Angie sounded exasperated, she gently rubbed my back. “If I were to abandon you now, it would only damage your heroic reputation.”

“I don’t care about that.”

“But I do. To me...you *are* a hero.”

I got the feeling that, through the course of our recent adventures, Angie and I had grown much closer. We’d done away with the facades we’d worn around each other, and it made for a much more comfortable atmosphere.

Angie leaned her forehead against my chest. “Leon, I’m going to cut ties with my family.”

“You are?” My voice hitched.

I sure hadn’t seen that coming, especially since a person’s house held such importance in this world. Cutting ties was a huge deal. It would mean Angie could never return to the Redgrave home. That wasn’t all; she’d lose the status afforded to her as a duke’s daughter.

“If I can’t be used to bind you to them, my house would have caught me before long anyway,” Angie concluded. “So there’s nothing for you to feel bad about.”

“But...”

“This is the path I choose. You don’t need to worry about me. In fact, if

anything, disinheriting myself will mean the Redgraves become *your* enemies. Are you prepared to take on that burden?"

I considered the matter for only a few seconds before nodding.

Angie lifted her face, eyes intense as she stared up at me. "Things are going to get tough from here on out. The majority of the regional lords will be your enemies. Among them will be those who brownnose and seem like they support you, even though they're only using you for their own ends. If you mean to rebuild the kingdom as it is, it's going to be a lot of work."

"If that's the most peaceful way to resolve things, then so be it."

"All right. Then I will support you." Angie smirked mischievously. "I'll also stay the night. I'm sure you'll be too afraid to sleep if I don't."

My cheeks heated. "Th-that's not true."

"Oh? Then shall I return to my room?"

"No, I lied! Sorry!"

And so the two of us stayed together all through the night.

Chapter 11:

Cutting Ties

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Livia and Noelle headed to Leon's room. They couldn't seem to find Angie anywhere, and on top of that, they wanted to know what had happened between her and Leon.

Dark shadows lined Livia's face as she and Noelle trudged down a ship corridor. Dejectedly, she said, "It looks like they couldn't repair their relationship after all."

Noelle's expression was just as glum, pained by Angie and Leon's broken bond. But talking about it would only make them even more depressed, so she forced herself to be cheerful. "Well, it's not like they're breaking up because they hate each other. It's just that they have their own duties and stuff."

Livia clenched her fists. "I guess you're right."

Angie and Leon had managed to clear the air to some degree, but that hadn't really fixed anything.

When the girls arrived at Leon's door, they hesitantly knocked.

"Mr. Leon?" Livia ventured. "Are you awake?"

When there was no response, Noelle pounded harder. "Wake up! Real talk, we can't find Miss Angelica anywhere. Cleare's no help—she keeps saying everything's fine. Could you nudge her for us?"

The door suddenly swung open. Noelle's booming voice had done the trick. Except on the other side, she and Livia were met by an unexpected sight: Angie was standing there with her hair down. Her cheeks were bright red, and she had trouble meeting their eyes.

"My apologies for worrying you two," she said.

Livia's smile tightened, but she was relieved to see Angie safe and well. "Thank goodness! Angie, yesterday—"

“Hold on. Let me say something first.” Angie’s expression turned grim as she looked at them both in turn.

Livia and Noelle snapped their mouths shut and waited.

Angie let out a small sigh. “I have decided to stay with Leon. But in return, I am cutting ties with my house.”

Two surprised shrieks echoed through the ship’s corridors.

Angie dropped by her family’s estate in the capital early in the morning. Her father sat before her, mood sour as he glared at his daughter. “I never dreamed my darling little girl would dare to bite the hand that feeds her.”

Angie stood straight. “Father, you forced me into this position.”

“I didn’t think you would even imagine turning on your own blood. I take it this means you failed to persuade Duke Bartfort to join our cause? It seems your womanly wiles were no match for Her Majesty’s.”

Angie gave him a thin smile. “Leon has made it abundantly clear that he will never wed Princess Erica. Moreover, he swore that he would do whatever it took to keep me by his side—including face the wrath of House Redgrave.”

Vince’s expression contorted. Even if this was all true, he couldn’t countenance his daughter’s decision to disown herself. “And what is the *meaning* of this?”

“Leon thinks it would be rather troublesome if the kingdom were to fall.”

“It seems he doesn’t understand the stakes. If this kingdom doesn’t crash to its knees when it deserves to, it will only fall into further humiliating decline as it struggles to survive.”

Holfort’s end was nigh. It was an exercise in futility to prolong its existence even a day longer.

Angie nodded. “I agree with you.”

“Then why haven’t you convinced him so? If he is attached as you claim, it should be an easy task.”

True. Angie was sure it *would* be a simple matter to convince Leon of her point of view. In fact, if Angie merely requested his aid, Leon would likely take up the Redgraves' cause. But...

"I didn't want to."

"Angie!" Vince snapped sternly.

"What I *want* is for Leon to be happy."

Vince's fists hammered down on his desk. "Do you truly mean to betray House Redgrave? Your own family?!"

In short, was she telling him that they were now enemies?

Angie's eyes flitted one way, then the other, as if hesitating, but her resolve was firm. "I will not make excuses for myself. I appreciate everything you have done for me, Father. And I wish you all the best."

"You have forfeited the right to wish me anything. As of today, you and I are no longer father and daughter. Now get out of my house!"

"Pardon me." Angie turned her back toward Vince and started toward the door—only to balk just before she reached it and look over her shoulder.

Vince glowered at her, as if he wanted to shove her out the door himself.

Angie slipped a photograph out of her pocket. Vince likely couldn't have seen it from that distance, so she described its contents. "I have but one more thing to tell you. Leon and I ventured into a dungeon and retrieved the treasure within."

Vince nearly shot out of his chair. He barely stopped himself, hovering awkwardly over his seat. "Wh-what did you say?"

As a father and a nobleman, he could not forgive her daughter for her actions today. However, hearing that his little girl had made such an incredible accomplishment made his pulse quicken. As a father and an *adventurer*, he wanted to celebrate her achievement.

This revelation also reawakened his own thirst for adventure. His daughter had managed to do something he never had. Vince longed to congratulate her, even as he was in equal measure envious that she had experienced what he

hadn't. Alas, he had already renounced her. Desperate as he was to wring out more details, he couldn't openly show his interest.

Angie read all this in his expression, which was why she politely added, "The dungeon was located beneath a ruin called the Fortress of the Golden Hands. We already cleared out the treasure inside, but we are in the midst of assembling an investigation team. I hear a concerted effort to study the location will commence at some point in the next few years."

Although Angie's party had already taken everything they could find from the fortress, it was possible they had missed things. Other adventurers would doubtless soon head there in droves, hoping to snag overlooked trinkets.

Vince could scarcely hide his own eagerness to do the same, but he forced himself to turn his head away and settle back into his chair. "A-and? What of it?" he demanded, arms crossed. "You are nothing to me now. Get out of my house, and be quick about it."

"I will be sure to do just that. Thank you again, Father, for everything." Angie bowed her head low, the sorrow thick in her voice.

The door closed behind her, and the sound of her footsteps faded before disappearing altogether. Left alone in his office, Vince sighed deeply.

"Fool of a girl. You *know* you should have told me about the dungeon story first. Is this your little revenge?" Vince's expression fell. He had indeed wanted to hear more about her adventure. He stared up at the ceiling. A smile slowly curled his lips. "Ah, but she had a good look in her eyes."

Although the ties between them had been irreparably severed, Vince couldn't help but be pleased to see how much his daughter had matured.

Hering and I met up on the academy's rooftop to discuss future plans. But for whatever reason, the topic kept coming back to the Fortress of the Golden Hands. Hering spent most of our time together gushing about Mia.

"Listen to this," he said. "Mia may have identified a brand-new species of plant. I would love for it to be named after her, if it's all the same to you—it was her discovery, after all. What do you think?"

“How many hours do you plan to ramble about Mia?”

“I have barely scratched the surface of our trove of trip stories.” Hering cocked his head to the side. He really couldn’t see my problem with this. The word *overprotective* had probably been coined just for him.

I sighed.

That seemed to give Hering an ounce of guilt for his Mia-athon. “Anyway, how are things on your end?”

“What do you mean?”

“I heard the duke’s daughter renounced her family to be with you. That struck me as a sudden reversal, considering she’d just been discussing breaking up with you. Figured I’d asked you how you managed that. For future reference, I mean.”

I clicked my tongue. “So this is pure curiosity, huh?” There was no point in hiding the truth. Although I figured I’d leave out the part where I’d completely humiliated myself. There was no need to submit myself to that shame a second time. “All I did was tell Angie that I needed her.”

“That’s it?”

“What else could it have been?”

Hering shook his head. “I just... If that was all it took, don’t you think you could have avoided the whole thing if you’d just told her that sooner?”

Guess he’s got me there. He’d also kind of backed me into a corner. I had to come up with some sort of way to explain my failure to do so. “Well, guess it boils down to the whole values difference thing?” I blurted out.

I hadn’t put much effort into thinking that through, but Hering seemed to buy it. His expression sobered as he turned pensive. “True, that is a significant hurdle for us.”

“Sure is,” I said with a yawn.

Hering leaned back against the rooftop railing and gazed up at the sky. Finally, he brought up the real reason we’d decided to meet up. “I think it’s about time I make contact with the final love interest.”

“Robson, you mean? You’re still pretty unimpressed with all the love interests, though.”

“Only because I refuse to entrust Mia’s life to anyone less than worthy of her.”

Yeah. Exactly. That’s the whole problem.

On top of his overprotectiveness, Hering was super picky when it came to Mia’s potential partner. Not that I could blame him; he came with quite the impressive resume to measure the others against. He was apparently quite a popular knight back in the empire. While he wasn’t a noble, the empire was a meritocracy where Hering would be perfectly capable of earning a noble title for himself. I hadn’t asked him about his finances, but I’d figured he had to have sufficient savings; he didn’t really penny-pinch or anything. I *had* been surprised to learn that whenever he used his money, it was almost always because of something related to Mia.

Hering’s face fell as he turned to me. “To tell the truth, I have recently concluded that I may have been a touch too critical.”

“A touch? You think it’s only a touch?!”

“That’s why I would like you to help me judge them more fairly.”

“Me?”

What use was I going to be in this particular arena? I was puzzled.

“What choice do I have?!” said Hering. “Who else could I turn to for this favor? Your sister—that is, Miss Marie—seems to have fairly terrible taste.”

Oof. But I can’t argue that point. Given the total losers Marie had surrounded herself with, it would have been stranger for Hering to say he *did* trust her judgment. Whether in this life or the last one, Marie had always had a habit of finding the most useless guys.

“I’m not particularly confident about my taste either,” I said. “The more important thing would be whether Mia and Robson can even get along, right? Trust me, nothing good can come of trying to force people together.”

My time in the Alzer Republic—and all the Loic drama—had made it crystal

clear that a successful relationship needed actual chemistry. Fortunately, Hering seemed to agree.

“Of course, I don’t disagree. Feelings come first. But we must also ensure he would be capable of protecting her. If nothing else, I’m considering training him until I’m satisfied he can properly fill the role. What do you think?”

I stared at Hering in disbelief. “What, you wanna turn this into a nobleman training simulator?”

“If he’s unsuitable at the outset, what choice do I have but to shape him into a man who is?!”

This dude is seriously saying that if the love interest can’t meet his standards, he’s gonna whip him into shape until he does. Does he even hear himself? What makes him go this far for her?

“Don’t you think your love for Mia is a little, uh...intense?”

“Not at all. My feelings for her are perfectly ordinary.”

I had a tough time trying to talk Hering down. And he’d got me thinking: What if he could whip my bevy of bozos into shape? I had half a mind to hand them over to him for this nobleman training thing.

Ethan Fou Robson had been born into the world with a silver spoon in his mouth. He was the son of a prominent earl, and he possessed talent for both the sword and the arcane arts. Physical combat was hardly his only forte; even his literary abilities were exemplary. Having no apparent shortcomings, he had been hailed as a genius from a tender age.

Ethan’s older brother couldn’t have been more different; he lacked for any variety of talent, and he was utterly dimwitted and spineless besides. He was terribly jealous of Ethan. Sensing that his position as heir would inevitably be endangered, he went so far as to scheme to have Ethan assassinated. But as it turned out, he couldn’t do that properly either. The whole scheme was too childish to even warrant being called “an assassination plot.” Regardless, their parents had disinherited him for it.

Ethan wasn't really privy to the details of what had happened after that. The cover story was that his brother had been sent to live with some relatives in the distant countryside or some such. But was he actually alive? Or was he dead?

His parents, fearing that his older brother would only bring ruin to their house, had been more than glad to seize an opportunity to elevate Ethan to the position of official heir.

"Yes, put simply, I am the perfect man, who has everything his heart desires."

The words unto themselves were arrogant and condescending, but Ethan spoke them in a voice marred by faint melancholy.

Upon finding Erin in the academy's inner courtyard, he had plopped himself down on the bench next to her and begun regaling her with this tale of his past. For Erin, the whole spiel had come rather out of nowhere. She stared at him in utter bewilderment.

"Oh, really? It sounds like you had an awfully difficult time."

A small, adorable homemade lunch box was spread on her lap. She had been eating by herself until Ethan interrupted by inviting himself to sit beside her. He had laid out his entire history completely unprovoked.

Ethan kept stealing little glances at Erin's lunch box, so she offered him some. "Here."

"Oh, pardon me. Your food simply looked so delicious that I couldn't help but stare. My true desire was to gaze upon you in all your beauty, my lady, but it seems your cooking seduced me." Ethan eagerly took a bite of the proffered omelet. After chewing a couple of times, he swallowed and grinned. "You will make a fine wife someday, I assure you. Incidentally, I always have an empty seat next to me. You are welcome, at any time, to sit beside me." As he spoke, he grasped her hands.

It was then that Erin realized, *Oh. This guy is hitting on me.*

"Um, I am incredibly flattered by your generosity, but, uh..." Erin hesitated. She wanted to reject him as politely as possible.

At that moment, another man strolled up.

“What are you doing?!” It was Jake, rage rolling off him in waves.

Startled by his sudden appearance and the venom in his voice, Erin jerked her hands out of Ethan’s. “Prince Jake?! Th-this is, um...”

Jake eyed her flustered attempt to explain before glaring at Ethan. “You’re bothering her. Move it, Ethan.”

Since they were both first-years, Jake was already familiar with Ethan. Likewise, Ethan knew the young prince. Sadly, by no stretch of the imagination could their relationship be called “good.”

Ethan flashed him a bold smile. “What do we have here? Why, it’s His Highness—the prince who failed to nab the seat of crown prince. From what I hear, you weren’t able to convince Duke Bartfort to back your bid, hm? I suppose he’s chosen the fallen Prince Julius over you?”

Ethan’s willingness to openly antagonize Prince Jake spoke volumes as to his own house’s position in the struggle between factions; the Robsons clearly weren’t supporting Jake’s claim. Nonetheless, Jake wasn’t about to back down.

“I was impressed when you elbowed your brother out of the way to claim his inheritance,” he countered, “but it seems I gave you far more credit than you’re due. You’re nothing but a child who covets what other people possess.”

Ethan’s smile remained pasted on his face, but the dig at his maturity made his brows raise. He strove to look unaffected while his anger simmered quietly beneath the surface. “The nerve of you, saying such things. Say, wherever *is* your little bodyguard, Oscar? Isn’t he supposed to look after you? But I don’t see him anywhere. What could that be about?”

The subtle implication: that without Oscar to help him, Jake was nothing but a helpless child himself.

Jake pressed a hand over his mouth, face scrunching. “Oscar went to see some girl.”

“The man seemed incapable of pursuing anything but his own muscles. He’s gone to see a girl? I suppose he’s managed to mature. You would do well to learn by his example.”

Despite Ethan's savage burn, Jake's response was rather half-hearted. "Guess you're right. Erin, come on."

Jake packed Erin's lunch box for her and gripped her hand, pulling her away from Ethan.

Ethan watched as they went. He showed no outward signs of being the least bit perturbed, but his gaze was cold as it bored into Jake's back. "I'll let you keep her for now, Your Highness. Enjoy your time while it lasts."

Ethan knew exactly what awaited Jake. The fate of the prince of a kingdom on its way to ruin wasn't very hard to imagine. Sympathy was what compelled him to watch in silence as Jake dragged Erin away.

"Lord Oscar!"

"Miss Jenna!"

Oscar and Finley had ventured out together to a café close to the academy. Jenna was already waiting for them there. The moment she saw Oscar, she broke out into a huge smile. She didn't even seem to notice that Finley had come too. It was clear to Finley, however, that Jenna was putting on an act.

"I'm so sorry to bother you, calling you here out of the blue, but I so desperately wanted to have lunch with you, Lord Oscar," Jenna said in a sugary-sweet voice.

Finley stared at her sister with a blank face, her eyes glazed.

Alas, Oscar was entirely oblivious to Finley's reaction. He blushed. "No, I was happy to receive your invitation. I don't have much experience with being invited out by girls, so it made my heart race."

"Oh, Lord Oscar, you are *too* cute!"

The rest of the café's customers either watched the fawning couple with a smile or felt awkward being subjected to all the PDA. Some, who had no partner to call their own, gnashed their teeth, cursing the world for its unfairness.

Finley, meanwhile, thought, *Why me? What have I done to earn such cruel and unusual punishment?*

Finley had grown close to Oscar first, only for him to somehow wind up in a romantic relationship with her sister. It was difficult to fathom how—or even *why*—this was happening. She just couldn't stop staring at them, though eventually Jenna took notice of her.

“Oh, Finley, you're here too.” The expression on Jenna's face made clear that she thought of her little sister as a third wheel, and there wasn't an ounce of affection in her words.

“Sorry to barge in, but Mom and Dad asked me to—said to keep an eye on you. Just to make sure you don't cause any problems.” Finley plastered a fake smile on her face.

“There's really no need for you to trouble yourself,” Jenna insisted. “Lord Oscar and I are just going on a nice date. Why not buy yourself some candy and go home like a good little girl? Oh, and make sure to give a glowing report to Mom and Dad.”

Finley shook her head. “Sorry, but I take things seriously. I'm afraid I couldn't possibly do that.”

While Oscar was listening, he was too dense to pick up on the venom underlying the sisters' words. He was thoroughly preoccupied with taking a seat and starting their order.

Finley gritted her teeth, though she was careful not to let it show. *It's not like I actually wanna be here watching over you two! Have a little consideration for my feelings, would you?!* She had no other choice but to tag along. Her parents were honestly worried that, in the process of dating Oscar, Jenna would stir up some kind of trouble again. *Plus, Leon told me not to let her out of my sight.*

Leon was giving Finley an allowance, so she could hardly refuse him when he asked for a favor. Granted, even without her older brother and parents' requests, her intuition would have told her it was dangerous to leave Jenna unchecked.

The sisters exchanged empty smiles, their eyes reflecting emotions that entirely differed from their expressions.

Finley took her seat across from the couple. “We don't have much time, so

let's eat quickly. We have to get back in time for afternoon classes. Sadly, we don't have the free time that you do, Big Sis."

Jenna ignored her, plopping down beside Oscar. She cuddled up to his muscled arm and purred, "Lord Oscar, I hear you discovered treasure in a dungeon. Dare I hope you earned a tidy profit?"

"No, the duke took all the treasure."

Jenna's face fell. "Huh?"

"I should have known better," he went on. "Someone who's conquered dungeons before is something else entirely. I can't even come close to measuring up." Oscar beamed. "But I consider myself fortunate to have upperclassmen like him—and the others, of course."

Jenna's lips tautened. "Oh, r-really? So Leon got his hands on treasure again, then. Huh."

"Yes! The duke was incredibly considerate toward me too. He said he would feel just awful if I pushed myself and got injured."

Those probably weren't the only things Leon felt bad about. Finley suspected he also felt guilty that Oscar was stuck with Jenna, but she kept that thought to herself as she sipped the drink the waiter had brought.

Jenna leaned across the table toward Finley. "What's the meaning of this? You're telling me Leon found treasure again? But he's filthy rich already, isn't he?"

"I have no clue. He's been weirdly out of it lately."

Jenna rolled her eyes. "He's always out of it. And I don't just mean perpetually distracted. I mean he has a few screws loose." Although Leon and Jenna were bound by blood, Jenna's impression of her brother was less than flattering. Finley didn't try to argue with this assessment either. She had seen what Leon was like at home. He certainly wasn't the hero everyone seemed to view him as.

"It's worse than usual," Finley explained. "He's sticking to Miss Angelica like glue."

“That dope. If he’s making so much money, he could afford to give me a cut.”

Jenna had no legitimate claim to anything Leon earned. Her comment was completely illogical. Besides, for as much as she grumbled, she didn’t really expect him to split his earnings with her.

Finley tilted her head. “But I heard that Leon’s footing the bill so you can live in the capital.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’s a totally separate matter.”

“You’re just as much of a scumbag as he is.” What really beggared belief was how Oscar had fallen for a person like Jenna in the first place. Finley couldn’t help but wonder. She had also reached her limit. “Mr. Oscar?”

“Yes, what is it?”

“Why did you fall for Jenna? I mean, she’s my sister, but even I think she’s the worst.”

Jenna’s face flushed with anger. “Finley! Do you have some kind of grudge against me? Is that it?” She glared daggers at her little sister. She wouldn’t let anyone get away with ruining her happiness.

Unfortunately, Jenna’s protestations did little to dissuade Finley. She hated her sister too much to care. “I think you’ll be better off leaving her sooner rather than later, Oscar.”

Enmity and resentment burned like a cold flame in Jenna’s eyes as she stared Finley down.

“That will never happen,” Oscar insisted, cheeks coloring as he scratched his head awkwardly. “Miss Jenna is such a wonderful woman.”

Abruptly, Jenna’s eyes light up. She clasped her hands together as if offering a prayer to her beloved. “Oh, Lord Oscar.”

“Miss Jenna,” he cooed back at her.

They gazed at one another, lovestruck.

Finley slapped her hands over her face. *What’s wrong with him? Is he completely blind?!*

After hearing Finley's report, I found myself in my room with my head cradled in my hands. "How can I even begin to apologize to Viscount Hogan?!"

Would he forgive me if I honestly admitted my older sister had seduced his son? If I apologized for it? Not likely. If I were him and I discovered someone like that cretin had wormed her way into the good graces of the heir of my house, I would be furious.

While I moped about this development, Angie busied herself making us something to drink, looking exasperated the whole while. "I don't think you really need to worry about it. If anything, Viscount Hogan will be happy, right?"

"This is Jenna we're talking about! The girl who played around with like a hundred guys when she was at school and caused me nothing but trouble. I can't pity Oscar enough."

Sure, Oscar was dumb as a box of rocks, but he was a decent person. It was just plain tragic that he'd fallen for the wrong girl. I knew Jenna extremely well, which was why I had hoped—for his own sake—that Oscar would call it quits with her. *That's right! For his sake!*

The bigger question was why the hell I was wasting my time worrying about another dude's love life. And one of the love interests of the third game, of all people!

"More importantly," Angie said—it sounded like she'd grown bored of this topic. "Word of my disownment will likely get out soon. When that happens, the palace and school will be in an uproar. People will keep an even closer eye on your movements than they did before."

Everyone was on tenterhooks waiting to see who I would choose to support. Personally, I would have preferred to be in the limelight for literally any other reason. Why couldn't I be known for being the academy's most prominent and refined expert on tea?

"I hate all this attention," I whined.

"It's the price you pay for choosing me."

I pursed my lips. “Then I guess I can put up with it.”

Angie giggled. “Anyway, Leon, you should continue to demonstrate your strong relationship with the palace. Giving the impression that you’re close with Prince Julius should help.”

“Just Julius? What about Erica and Jake?” I asked.

If all I had to do was be chummy with the royal family, then they seemed like viable options too.

Angie shook her head. “Prince Jake is too power hungry. Too ambitious. If you get any closer to him, he may well take advantage of your relationship to pursue the position of crown prince.”

“Really? You think Jake’s that set on the throne? He seems way too obsessed with Eri to pay attention to anything else.”

I often saw them together at school. The way I heard it, Jake was constantly chasing her around. Eri was probably happy about it, though—she didn’t look remotely displeased to be the target of his affections.

But aren’t they both guys? Or, no, I mean, I get that Eri’s had a sex change and all. The problem is that this world doesn’t even know what a “sex change” is—so no matter how feminine Eri looks, all her paperwork still says she’s a dude.

I had informed Angie about this already, which was why she was also worried. “When Jake learns the truth, he may spiral out of control.”

“I’ll just hop in Arroganz and beat him bloody, if that’s what it takes. That way he can be as brainless and carefree as Julius and the rest of his nerd herd,” I said.

“We can consider that a last resort. Since that’s settled, one more thing: Keep your tea parties with Princess Erica to a minimum.”

Wait, why wasn’t I allowed to spend time with her? I tilted my head at Angie, bewildered. She reached over and pinched my cheek.

“Ouch, that hurts.”

“I’m only doing this because you don’t seem to understand. There are political reasons why I don’t want you getting too intimate with Princess Erica, yes, but

there's more to it than that. As your partner, I don't like it."

"Huh?"

Angie released my cheek and gently caressed the swollen, reddened skin with her fingers. "It's jealousy. Not to mention, if you grow too close, Her Majesty will make a move. She will take whatever measures she must to protect her homeland."

The queen Angie described was a woman I had never seen before, but that just made her warning all the more urgent.

"When the United Kingdom of Lepart sent Her Majesty to Holfort, it caused quite a commotion; she was their trump card. Giving her away meant playing their hand. Small wonder they were devastated. It was said she would have become the leader of their alliance, had she stayed."

"Wow. Miss Mylene is incredible." While I said that, Angie looked none too pleased by my commentary. I cleared my throat, hoping to distract her. "Ahem..."

Angie went on, "The United Kingdom has long suffered at the hands of Rachel. Her Majesty is well aware of this, and it makes her desperate to suppress Rachel and their allies."

It sounded like she had heard a lot of this straight from the horse's mouth, having served Miss Mylene when she was younger.

"And that's why you think she'd use her daughter as a political pawn?" I asked.

"She's not heartless, but as a member of the royal family, she is capable of making difficult calls. Case in point, Princess Erica has been engaged to the Frazer heir since they were but children."

I felt a bit conflicted about that forced engagement, what with Erica being my niece and all.

"At any rate, that's why I advise against spending too much time with Her Highness, for reasons both political and personal," Angie said. "Since I've been so upfront about all this, I assume you'll rethink the way you've been

conducting yourself. Right?” She leaned in toward me.

I flinched a little. “You sure are more assertive than you used to be.”

“I gave up on tact. Indirect expressions of affection don’t work on you.”

While I was at a loss for words, a knock sounded on the door.

“Who’d be here at this time?” I wondered aloud, lifting myself out of my chair.

Angie narrowed her eyes. Her expression suggested she knew exactly who it was. “As much as I appreciate his punctuality—he’s even earlier than I requested—it would be nice if he could show a little more consideration.”

“Huh? Who’d you ask to come here?”

“Prince Julius.”

At Angie’s behest, Julius and I set out to walk the capital’s streets together. It was depressing, really—going out alone with another dude. Not that Julius seemed remotely affected. He was in high spirits.

“Angelica said I was free to use your money to stop by as many food stalls as I please. Let’s visit all my favorites, then get started on developing a plan for my new business, why don’t we?” Julius beamed at me, his eyes sparkling like the handsome otome game hero he was.

All the girls in the vicinity let out wistful sighs, enchanted by his appearance.

Dude, what’s the point of smiling at me like that? You’re not gonna get my heart pounding.

“We’re going to a bunch of food stalls? Is that really princely behavior?” I asked.

“This is all part of my daily regimen. Besides, on top of being my passion, there are practical benefits.”

“No, that’s literally not what I’m asking.”

The bigger question is why you look so happy to be walking around with another guy! Julius was an unfathomable, mysterious creature to the likes of

me. I looked at him in the same way people looked at bizarre deep sea creatures in an aquarium.



“Master, I have identified several suspicious individuals in the area,” said Luxion.

“Assassins?”

I kind of expected them. I did have quite the bounty on my head, and some people had already tried to take my life. But Luxion soon informed me that this wasn't the case, at least not right now.

“No, they appear to be assessing your relationships. As Angelica suggested, a number of people are paying more attention to you.”

“That desperate to figure out who my friends are, huh? Pretty pathetic.”

“I am afraid I must agree,” said Luxion. “If this country has placed such strong emphasis on you, they are clearly on the brink of ruin.”

“Couldn't you stand to be even a little nicer to me? What would you do if I ordered you to be nice?”

Luxion gave me exactly zero opportunity to cling to hope before he swept it out of reach. “I have given the matter serious consideration, and I have come to the decision that no, I will not ‘be nice’ to you.”

“You answered the question *instantly*. What do you mean you gave it ‘serious consideration’?”

While we squabbled with each other like always, Julius scanned our surroundings and let out a small sigh. “I haven't felt this in a very long time. In fact, this is worse than when I was the only point of focus.”

What's he talking about? I frowned at Julius, but his expression remained solemn as he led me through the streets. However, his pace picked up, and he was soon weaving between people as he went.

“Hey, what's up with you?” I asked.

“We're being watched by quite a number of people. It seems you're more popular than I ever was, Leon.” Julius chuckled.

I sneered. “Just a bunch of people who I don't care about and who can't take a hint.”

“I know how you feel. It used to be the same for me.”

For the first time, I actually kind of understood where Julius was coming from. What must he have been through, being under so much scrutiny when he was crown prince? It certainly wasn't a good feeling, knowing people were studying your every little move.

“It will only grow worse,” Julius warned me. “There will be more of a furor at the palace, of course, but the same thing will happen at the academy.”

“Seriously?”

“That's just how it works. In any case, it seems you got lucky with Angelica.”

My jaw nearly dropped to the ground. What was he saying? And in public of all places! “Y-you dummy! Don't say I 'got lucky'!”

Julius tilted his head, but he didn't give my protest an inch. “She looks far less anxious and troubled. In fact, she seems more confident and assured than ever. You're going to have it rough from here on out, you know?”

Now that Angie had shaken off all her doubts, she was even more headstrong. And thanks to that, I was finding myself easily overwhelmed.

“She already has him wrapped around her little finger,” Luxion assured Julius.

“Hey!”

“I have only spoken the truth.”

I huffed and turned away, frustrated by my inability to argue the point.

Julius laughed. “You really are heads above me in every way. Hang in there, Leon, and don't back down.”

I suspected that last part was less about my specific relationship with Angie and more general encouragement. “Don't worry. I'll be just fine.”

Chapter 12:

A Regular Event

“I CAN SCARCELY BELIEVE what I’m hearing. So he cut ties with Duke Redgrave and threw in his lot with the royal family?”

Ethan heard of Leon and Julius’s adventure in the capital the very next day. Duke Redgrave had soundly disowned his daughter, but Leon maintained his engagement to her. Moreover, Leon had been seen strolling the streets with Julius. One could only infer this meant that he’d chosen to side with the royal family. There was further proof to support this conclusion, and Ethan trusted his sources.

His face contorted. This completely upended his plans.

“That means at this rate, Lady Erin will marry Prince Jake!” Ethan clutched his head in despair, curling in on himself as his mind returned to his first meeting with her.

A few days after the academy’s entrance ceremony, Ethan had found himself disgusted with the middling quality of his peers. He made no effort to speak with them, keeping his distance. He was different. That viewpoint left him isolated.

Only one person reached out to him at that time—Erin. She likely didn’t remember the encounter, but she had called out to Ethan where he stood, all by himself. Their conversation lasted only a few brief minutes. Ethan remembered it vividly. They hadn’t spoken of anything in particular, but his pulse had quickened. Only after she left had he realized what it meant.

“Lady Erin is the perfect woman. How could she be anything but, when a perfect man has fallen for her? I can’t fathom how she could be on such good terms with Prince Jake. His future is execution—as befits the prince of a fallen kingdom. But now everything has changed!”

Ethan had only ever relinquished his claim to Erin—and given the prince the opportunity to enjoy her company—because he was convinced their time

together would be short. That Jake's life would soon be at its end. Now Leon had chosen to support the royal family. That would lead the regional lords, eager to bring Holfort to its knees, to grow cautious. In fact, one nobleman had already withdrawn from Duke Redgrave's faction. Ethan's house, Robson, had likewise sent new orders instructing him to act with utmost prudence on campus.

This means that the chances of Jake's execution have dramatically narrowed!

"How have things diverged from my plans?! I am a *genius*!" Ethan believed that with every fiber of his being. Thus, he threw aside all concerns as to his status in the hierarchy and decided to move forward with the actions he now deemed necessary. "I have no choice but to draw a line in the sand."

Everything Ethan did was for Erin—to communicate his love to her.

Hering and I strolled down an academy hall along with our two openly hostile partners.

Luxion fixed Brave with a glare, his red lens gleaming ominously. Brave glowered with just as much animosity, the veins in his eyes more pronounced and irritated than usual. You could feel sparks flying (in the bad way) as they drifted along behind us.

Hering, meanwhile, had loosened his shirt collar. He looked nervous. "I'm going to do it," he swore. "I'm going to see for myself if Robson is worthy of Mia." His expression hardened, eyes narrowed like he was about to step onto the battlefield.

"Are you planning to formally introduce yourself to Robson or kill the guy? I can practically feel the animosity rolling off you. Fix yourself."

"M-my apologies. I can't help but tense up in this situation."

I was starting to feel bad for Robson. He had no idea that we were coming. But he was one of the game's love interests, and that in itself made us skeptical as to whether he was a decent candidate; the other love interests hadn't exactly inspired confidence.

Guess I should reserve any sympathy for after we get the measure of his worth.

Hering's eyes looked every way but at me. "Bartfort..."

"Just call me Leon. What is it?"

"In that case, Leon, you can call me Finn. But to the point, speaking hypothetically...if you were in my situation, and Robson were to prove unworthy of Mia, what would you do?"

Surely it was a bit pessimistic to be entertaining negative possibilities before we'd even met the guy. Then again, maybe not. Given all my past experiences in this world, pessimism usually worked out for the best.

"I have absolutely no hope for any of the love interests to begin with, so it wouldn't really be a problem. Besides, you said yourself you'd just train him up if he falls short, right?"

Hering—or rather, Finn—nodded hesitantly. "Y-yes, you're right. If he falls short, I can take his improvement into my own hands. If I force him to escape the brink of death a few times, surely he'll be forged into a more respectable individual. Right?"

"If your standards are that high up in the sky, Mia's gonna be single forever."

Finn was really going for the gold in the Overprotective Olympics.

As we approached the first-years' classrooms, where we hoped to speak with Robson, a great clamor rose from that very direction.

"They sure are noisy."

I figured the kids were just a lively bunch, but as we drew closer, Finn cocked his head. "No, they aren't normally this rowdy. Has something happened?"

Curious, we quickened our pace, just as Mia's voice came booming from the classroom. "If you're real men, you'll fight it out fair and square!"

Wait—is Mia okay?

The incident began prior to Leon and Finn's arrival. Jake and Ethan glowered

at one another. There was a significant height difference, with Ethan standing a couple heads taller than the young prince. Their faces were dark with unchecked rage.

“Want to run that by me again?” Jake snarled.

“I said you are unworthy of Lady Erin,” Ethan responded coolly. “You shoved your older brother aside, yet you’ve failed to claim the seat of crown prince. How could you possibly think you deserve to be with someone as sweet as Lady Erin?”

A vein bulged on Jake’s forehead. “Guess you feel entitled to say that since you stole your inheritance after getting rid of your own brother. But for being a self-proclaimed ‘genius,’ you’re pretty blind to people’s true worth. Are you trying to say that I’m my brother’s lesser? Is that it?”

Their classmates looked on nervously; the gross disrespect with which Ethan spoke to Jake was scandalous. Being students and classmates didn’t absolve of them of societal responsibilities. As if that weren’t bad enough, Jake seemed to have entirely forgotten that the academy had forbidden him from discussing the succession.

The situation was so volatile that the crowd erupted in whispers.

“Should we call Princess Erica?!”

“She already went home—she had a health exam.”

“Th-then what about Lord Oscar?!”

“He just left a moment ago—he went to meet his girlfriend.”

“Why?! Why would he leave in a situation like this?!”

Oscar’s complete lack of common sense left even his peers at a total loss. With no one else to turn to, their gazes landed on the only girl who stood a chance at doing something: Finley.

A few female students approached her and said, “Miss Finley, could we ask you for a tiny favor?”

Finley already knew what they wanted. She exhaled a long sigh and lifted herself out of her seat. “You want me to use my brother’s name to do

something about this, right? Fine.”

Ever since Finley had entered the academy, she had found her peers increasingly turned to her to deal with these messes. She was so accustomed to playing the role of mediator that she confidently strode up to the two boys.

“Would you two mind letting me cut in for a moment?” Finley asked in a sugary-sweet voice.

Both boys turned their gazes to her, but they looked equally liable to erupt at any moment.

“I’m afraid you’re making everyone uncomfortable, so would you mind dropping this little tiff for now? Besides, you’ll only trouble yourselves further if you draw any more attention than you already have. So how about it? Okay?”

Her proposal wasn’t unrealistic; it *would* be the smarter choice for them to back down. Finley hoped they had enough wherewithal to see that for themselves, but sadly, she was to be disappointed.

“Shut up, Bartfort,” said Jake. “Not even your brother could stop me today—I’m not going to back down. Not when it comes to this jerk.”

Ethan smiled mockingly. “So you do have a spine. You may be a prince who can’t hope to accomplish anything without the duke holding your hand, but I must commend you for showing such resolve.” His gaze traveled back to Finley. “Miss Bartfort, I am afraid I cannot back down either.”

Neither one heeded her request. And all of this fuss over a single girl.

Tears welled in Finley’s eyes. “No, um, I just meant...it’s not good for you to fight...”

As soon as Finley failed to convince the boys, the atmosphere in the classroom grew even more suffocating and intense. Several students fled the room altogether.

Amidst all this, one student slammed her fists against her desk and shot up. “How long do you two plan to bicker like this?!”

Everyone’s attention turned to Mia. The classroom went silent.

Mia’s cheeks colored a little, but she nonetheless bellowed, “If you’re real

men, you'll fight it out fair and square!"

An uproar ensued. But while their classmates were hissing, Jake and Ethan only stared at one another, silent.

Mia couldn't stand it. "It's pathetic for men to quibble like this. If you let the girl you love see you now, she'd be disappointed."

The boys grew flustered as they pictured this scenario.

"If you really are men—and not boys playing at being macho," Mia pressed, "and if you really love this girl, then you should duke it out properly!"

"You're right," said Jake. "I don't know what I was thinking. Erin wouldn't be happy seeing me trade barbs with someone."

Ethan nodded. "Miss Mia, you are the transfer student, yes? Thanks to you, my eyes have been opened. You are entirely correct. She would be most displeased with our verbal sparring."

Mia smiled, pleased to see they had so obediently heeded her words. "So you do understand! Yes, of course. You should both go straight to her and confess your feelings."

This was what Mia had meant when she said "fight it out"—but alas, her intention hadn't gotten through. The boys were back to glaring at one another.

"I don't have a glove on hand, but I'll still gladly challenge you to a fair duel, with Erin on the line," said Jake. "You're good with piloting an Armor for this battle, right?"

Ethan brushed his hair from his face. "A clean fight to determine the winner, is it? I have no complaints. I only worry that I might do you injury. Incompetent though you may be, you are still a prince."

As if it couldn't get any noisier in the classroom, the whispers grew even louder.

"A duel!"

"I can't believe it. They're actually dueling over a girl! This is so exciting!"

"Yeah, I'm actually looking forward to this!"

Despite their discomfort of moments ago, the other students now eagerly shared their anticipation for the match.

Mia was left gaping all on her lonesome. “Huh? Um... What? Why a duel? This could be easily solved if you both told her how you feel, right?!” No one paid her any attention. The excitement utterly drowned her out.

When Finn finally returned to the classroom, Mia dashed toward him, tears in her eyes. “Sir Knight!”

“What is it, Mia?! What happened? Did someone bully you?” His brows furrowed. “Just tell me who. They will soon taste the bitterness of regret.”

“Two of the boys are going to duel, and it’s all my fault!” Mia said.

“What...?” Dark shadows fell over Finn’s face as he turned to Leon. “What’s this about a duel?”

Leon scratched his head. He sent only a brief glance at the noisy first-years before sighing. “Don’t worry about it. It’s basically routine at this point.”

“You think dueling is *routine*?!”

Thus began a duel between men over another man.

Students gathered in the spectator seats of the academy arena, anxiously anticipating the upcoming showdown. Those of us in our final year decided to check it out as well. I was focused on the first-years. The female students were especially pumped, due the nature of the duel.

“Prince Jake and Lord Ethan are going to fight over a girl? This is *amazing*.”

“It’s like something straight out of a book.”

“I heard there was a duel like this a couple of years ago.”

The faces of those near me turned bitter at the mention of the last school duel. My fiancées were seated close to me, but I was also accompanied by Marie and her bums. My close friends, Daniel and Raymond, happened to be sitting just in front of me.

“Leon, they’re talking about you.”

“You’re pretty popular with the first-years, huh?”

“I didn’t get into that duel because I *wanted* to,” I curtly reminded them. I acted indifferent because taking their teasing seriously would only encourage them. “Besides, my duel had nothing to do with trying to win over a woman. There was nothing remotely romantic about my showdown with those blockheads.”

Raymond cupped his chin as he reflected on those bygone days. “How the times have changed. Back then, we all thought you’d essentially branded yourself an outcast from high society.”

“Yeah,” Daniel said. “Hard to believe you’re a duke now. And that, for some reason, you’re hanging out with the prince and his buddies.”

Trust me, I wish someone could tell me how the hell I got here. All I did was pulverize these numbskulls in a duel. Why did I have to shoulder the responsibility of being, for all intents and purposes, their guardian? Fate was an awfully cruel and unusual mistress.

Noelle leaned forward in her seat to my right, resting her elbows on her knees and her chin on her clasped hands. She looked annoyed as she stared reproachfully at the arena where the two Armors stood across from one another. “Leon,” she said, “you participated in a duel when you were in the republic too, right? And that was your second year in school. Which means you’ve been doing one a year. This country is terrifying.”

I nodded eagerly. “You said it. Me, I’m just a sweet, kind of sensitive guy. You can see why I’ve got all this anxiety from being born into this barbarous country.”

“So you say... But if that’s so, how come you seem to be enjoying yourself?”

“Because I’m not a part of *this* duel. Anyway, they call it a ‘duel,’ but it’s not like either of their lives are at stake. It’s just a show. Nothing wrong with enjoying a show.”

Noelle raised an eyebrow. “The fact that you can get any enjoyment out of this at all seems to prove you fit right in.”

Livia, seated to my left, poked my arm. When I glanced over, she motioned to

Julius and the other boys. “Mr. Leon, they’re staring.”

I followed her gaze to find them glaring daggers in my little old direction.

“I admit, picking a fight with you was a mistake,” said Julius. “If I could go back and do it all again, that’s the last thing I would have done.”

Jilk bobbed his head. “Yes, we should have been more careful.”

“You were a true and utter coward. You knew there was no way you could possibly lose, which is the only reason you challenged us.” Brad frowned; he clearly remembered the events all too well.

Greg folded his arms as his leg bounced restlessly. “Makes my blood boil even thinking about the crap you said.”

Chris’s glasses gleamed eerily. “Yes, our spirits were broken during the course of that duel. I will never forget the experience, and I swear that one day yet, I’ll make you pay.”

They were actually making me feel kinda bad for them.

I scratched my head. “Sorry, guys. I just never realized you’d all be that weak. If we agree to do something like that again, I promise to take it easier on you. So don’t be too mad at me.” I snickered at the indignation on their faces.

Angie smacked my back—she was seated behind me, giving her easy access to do so. “You idiot, don’t antagonize them.”

“Great, now I’ve pissed off Angie.”

Shoulders slumped, I turned to Marie. She was seated with Carla. Each girl had a drink in one hand and a snack in the other as they watched. And my awful sister was no less demanding than ever.

“This is more like entertainment than anything serious. Come on and get started already!” she shouted before guzzling down her drink in a single gulp.

Hey, wait just a second here. Don’t tell me that’s alcohol in your hands. It’s the middle of the day! How can you be knocking back liquor?!

“Lady Marie, your gulping capacity is incredible!” Carla seemed absolutely enchanted. But what was there to be enchanted with?

When I glanced over my shoulder, I spied Finn and Mia sitting together off to the side. Mia was feeling particularly nervous, since she felt responsible for this whole mess. As for Finn, he regarded Jake and Ethan with unbridled hatred, as if the boys were his mortal enemies for having dared to upset Mia. I could even hear him muttering under his breath.

“I’ll make them regret this...”

Uh, yeah. “Overprotective” might be underselling it.

Luxion floated close to me, and I asked, “Hey, who do you think will win this one?”

“Do you intend to place bets again?”

“Sure do.”

There was a short pause before he said, “Skill-wise, Ethan has the advantage. That is assuming the duel commences unimpeded. There is a distinct possibility it will be called off beforehand.”

“Yeah, guess you’ve got a point.”

After all, this duel was over a person whose changed sex wasn’t recognized by law.

The woman at the center of this duel, Erin, was seated in the section reserved for guests of honor.

A girl’s voice boomed throughout the stadium as the lively announcer—a fellow student—said, “A duel will commence momentarily as two men duke it out for the affections of a single woman! In one corner, we have the second prince, and in the other we have the heir to an earldom. And what’s the name of the woman who’s captured their hearts, you ask? It’s—wait...what?” The announcer paused as she scanned the lines and documents she had been given. Confused as she was, her brows knitted together.

Erin remained in her seat, eyes firmly shut and hands clasped in her lap.

The student went on, dumbfounded by the revelation she was about to share, “Um, actually, it seems that, although Miss Erin appears to be a girl, she is

registered as a male student under the name of Aaron. Uh, um... What in the world is going on?"

Murmurs washed over the arena.

"A man? She's a man?!"

"Huh? But you can clearly see she's a girl."

"What's happening?"

Suddenly, all the students knew Erin's original identity. She was braced for their disparagements and insults. But that wasn't all she feared...

Prince Jake will hate me now.

Tears trickled down Erin's cheeks. Her dream had been so short-lived.

"Erin, chin up!" called some of her friends—those who already knew of her past.

"Yeah, you haven't done anything wrong!"

"That's right. You're a goddess in our eyes!"

As some of the male students rallied to her defense, Erin finally lifted her head. She spotted Curtis, one of her peers, among them.

"You guys," she mumbled. The tears fell harder as she listened to their warm support.

Unfortunately, the opposite reaction arose as well.

"So these guys are fighting over another dude?"

"Isn't this a total scam?"

"There's no way this can be legit."

The social values of this world were rigid, and cases like Erin's were astronomically rare. Many of the students struggled to accept her.

Then Jake's voice shot up from the ring, where he was already seated in his suit of Armor. "So what?! You think I care whether she used to be a man? That doesn't change who she is as a *person*! I have every intention of going through with this duel. Ethan, if you want to give up, go ahead and say so. But if you do,

don't you ever get anywhere near Erin ever again!"

Ethan raised his weapon. "The way my heart sings proves that my love is genuine. Petty concepts like gender are irrelevant to a genius of my caliber!"

They were ready and raring to go, but the referee seemed stumped as to whether he could allow the duel to continue.

Confused voices rose from the stands.

"Huh? So they don't care if they're fighting over a guy?"

"The duel is still gonna happen, right?"

"Aaron? But you can *clearly* see she's a girl. What's up with that? Did she swap places with the real Aaron or something?!"

It was difficult for the onlookers to grasp what was happening; by all accounts, Erin was a woman. Yet the official paperwork clearly listed her as, you know, not. However, after a short pause, the referee came onto the field.

"All right, keep it fair and keep it clean! Start!" The man seemed about at his wits' end as he hollered at the competitors, but at his signal, the Armors clashed, sending sparks flying.

"I don't even know what's happening anymore," I said honestly.

Two love interests were officially at each other's throat over another one of the love interests. And thanks to that, all three were out of the running to be Mia's future partner.

And while there's a possibility among next year's new enrollees, it's pretty safe to say we've struck out. I held my head in my hands.

In my periphery, I noticed Oscar, who was sitting between Jenna and Finley. He was, of course, cheering for Jake. "That's it, hit him right there, Your Highness! Get him!"

Finley and Jenna weren't even watching; they were too busy glaring at each other like a couple of thugs ready to throw down.

For my part, I was ready to throw my hands up in defeat.

Livia watched closely as the boys battled in their Armors. “It was only two years ago when you dueled here, but the competition wasn’t nearly as close.”

As Luxion had predicted, Ethan had the edge. The difference in power wasn’t all that significant, however, so Jake wasn’t making it easy for him.

Behind me, Angie provided her own analysis. “Ethan’s claims to genius aren’t exactly empty. He *is* strong. Prince Jake has drive, however. He has always been a hard worker, so this is a solid match.”

Picturing Jake putting in all that effort to train did make him a little more endearing. Almost made my affection points go up. Not that I was going to let him romance me, of course.

“That makes me kinda wanna root for Jake,” I said.

Angie chuckled. “Perhaps, but it’s also unusual to see someone as apathetic as Ethan so motivated. It’s incredible Erin was able to bewitch both of them, although I suppose she is a beautiful woman... Sorry, she *is* a woman, isn’t she?”

I nodded. “She’s definitely a woman. Cleare used a Lost Item to fully change her sex.”

“And now it can never be used again, yes? She must have had true resolve to make the change.”

As we watched, Jake was steadily pushed to his back foot. One of his suit’s shoulders had been ripped off, and the chassis was covered in scratches.

“Prince Jake, I truly respect you,” said Ethan. “I never imagined you would keep up with me for so long. Thus, I must beg you to admit defeat. I do not wish to injure you.”

“Sorry, I have no intention of backing down,” said Jake. “But I’ll admit I underestimated you. You really are a genius.”

Had friendship somehow blossomed between the two?

Rapier in hand, Ethan dropped low as he thrust forward, sending the long, narrow blade slicing toward Jake. Jake used a far heavier weapon—a glaive that resembled a naginata. It should have given him an advantage, yet Ethan had managed to drive him into a corner. That wasn’t because Jake was by any

means weak; Ethan's strength was the real deal.

"And now, I shall end it, Your Highness!"

"Come get it, Ethan!"

They clashed. Ethan's rapier pierced Jake's Armor.

However, Ethan's own suit was rendered motionless as well—Jake had buried his glaive deep inside it.

"It appears to be a draw," Luxion's robotic voice announced.

"Well, this is gonna suck."

The duel hadn't settled their dispute.

I glanced at Finn. "At least they showed us what kinda men they are. What do you think?"

"Neither one are worthy of Mia," he said, expression blank.

Well, I saw that coming. The biggest problem was that neither one was interested in her in the first place.

Anyway, with that, the curtain closed on the duel for Erin's heart. Okay, maybe "closed" was the wrong word. I could already tell this was gonna be a whole ordeal.

"What do I *do* about this?" I muttered.

After the duel, for the first time in a long time, Marie and I met up—just the two of us. Luxion acted as lookout while we discussed matters in a deserted corridor of the arena.

"In the end, none of the love interests lived up to Finn's standards," I said. "The way things are going, it's looking like Mia won't even get a chance at love." I was trying to explain that Finn was basically a rabid guard dog when it came to her.

"Honestly, you and Finn are two peas in a pod. Totally clueless."

"Wait. Him too?" I tilted my head.

“Mia was never going to fall for any of those love interests.”

“Why not?”

Marie sighed. “Think about it. She already has the ideal man right at her side, always protecting her. That’s spoiled her for anyone else, obviously. She can’t help but compare any guy who comes along to Finn. Not that she’d need to—because when it comes to potential romantic partners, he’s the only option in her eyes.”

I slapped my hands over my mouth. “No way!”

“Finn fits his own criteria for a perfect partner, right? He’s got status and prestige, *and* he’s known as one of the strongest knights in the empire. I don’t have a clue about his financial situation, but Mia is always, always, always his first priority.”

I was finally seeing the bigger picture.

“Finn’s the perfect match,” I said.

“See, like I said, two peas in a pod. Not that you could hold a candle to him looks-wise—whew!”

“You don’t say...”

“Huh?” For some reason, Marie’s jaw dropped. She studied me from top to bottom as if she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Then she started to fidget. “Big Bro, uh, are you okay? It used to be you’d lose your cool when I said something like that and start throwing your own insults at me. You’re being awfully weird today.”

“I’ve always been like this. Anyway, what’s going on with you and your pursuit of independence, huh?”

Marie puffed up her (completely flat) chest. “I gave up on it. Erica said she was happy just getting to see me again.”

“She’s got a good head on her shoulders. Unlike you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll let you off this time. Anyway, I realized something. I’m way better served by just continuing to leech off of you for the rest of my life.”

That's a realization I kind of wish you hadn't come to. I'd prefer you get a serious job and strike out on your own already.

"No thanks," I said. "Find a way to make it on your own, and fast."

"You're really going to drop me just like that?!"

"I don't remember ever picking you up."

With that issue squared away, at least I now knew that Mia's eyes were locked on Finn. Sadly, that also meant the scenario for the third game had been undermined from the beginning, and by Finn's own hand.

This is a total mess.

Epilogue

THE HOLY KINGDOM of Rachel's central metropolis, known as the White Capital, floated above an enormous lake. This was the location of the royal castle, and in its grand audience chamber, the kingdom's chief ministers gathered. Each of them took a knee before the throne, where an elderly man with white hair was seated. Beside him stood the prime minister, who was similarly well past the prime of his life.

"Your Eminence," he began, "allow me to deliver my report. The Scumbag Knight, whom those barbarians call their hero, has chosen to lend his support to Holfort's royal family. This development suggests Holfort Kingdom will be able to avoid a civil war."

The king stroked his majestically long beard before lifting himself from his throne. "We cannot allow the Scumbag Knight to continue to act with impunity. Send official letters to all neighboring nations. Inform them that whosoever fails to take action against the kingdom that gave rise to the Scumbag Knight shall fall to ruin."

A chorus of acknowledgment rang out from the ministers.

"A splendid decision, Your Eminence," said the prime minister. "We shall use this opportunity to force the other nations to turn on Holfort, and in so doing, make them submit to our will."

The king continued stroking his beard and held up a hand. "Rachel, with her storied past, will naturally triumph over a lesser enemy like Holfort! Having said that, this Scumbag Knight certainly has given us the best justification we could have asked for. The threat he poses to the other nations means it will be a simple matter to rally them against him."

Rachel's plan was to forge an international alliance to launch a coordinated attack on Holfort.

"Your Eminence, I cannot commend your ingenious plan enough, and yet one matter still concerns me," said the prime minister. "Namely, the movements of that eccentric, Roland, and the scheming, devious princess of Lepart. It would

not surprise me if they were already privy to our movements.”

Roland the Eccentric and Mylene the Wicked Princess... Although Rachel’s king remembered their names, his expression remained unchanged, save for a slight narrowing of his eyes. “I grow weary of these lowlifes and their primitive history. We will not stop until we have razed Holfort to the ground, leaving nothing but a barren wasteland in its wake.”

The prime minister took a knee before his monarch.

The king continued, “They must be confident in themselves, armed as they are with that Lost Item they found. But in the end, that strength rests on one man alone. If our alliance launches a coordinated assault, Holfort will be wiped off the map before they even realize we have struck.”

“As you say, Your Eminence. I will hasten preparations to deploy our knights,” said the prime minister.

The king stretched out his right hand, palm turned up. Then he slowly curled his fingers, forming a fist. “Bring victory to our great motherland!”

Meanwhile, Holfort’s chief ministers were also gathered in their kingdom’s royal palace, where a frenzied quarrel was taking place.

“You mean to say *all* of our neighboring nations have turned on us?!”

“The republic remains our ally.”

“You think they’ll be of any help? They haven’t managed to recover yet!”

The Holy Kingdom of Rachel had become the head of an alliance composed of Holfort Kingdom’s many neighboring nations, and they were calling themselves the Armed Defense Concordat. Normally, these countries never saw eye to eye, and they certainly couldn’t coordinate. But the looming threat of Leon had convinced them to look past their differences. He had become a boogeyman ever since he subjugated an entire country by his own hand. They collectively hoped to obliterate him before he could acquire any more power.

Roland groaned as he watched the ministers carry on. “I never dreamed my son would demand a duel over another man. I thought he wanted to be the

crown prince? If he plans to marry a man, he won't be able to carry on the line." He just couldn't follow Jake's line of thinking, and it so distracted him that he was unable to pay attention to the matter at hand.

Mylene sat beside her husband, regarding him coldly. "I am astounded you can devote your thoughts to such things at a time like this. Must I remind you that nearly every one of our neighbors has declared open hostility against our kingdom?"

"Yeah, but Alzer's still on our side—and so are your people. It's not like we're completely screwed."

"The Alzer Republic has practically no military at present. And surely you are already well aware that my homeland lacks the strength to muster a proper fighting force."

Roland shrugged. "Still better that they're with us than against us."

His devil-may-care attitude only frustrated Mylene even more. "Duke Bartfort may be strong, but if all our enemies face us as a united front, Holfort will be nothing but a sea of flames in a matter of days. Our status as a world power is in open decline."

As if the deck wasn't already stacked against them, the regional lords had distanced themselves from the throne. If Leon sent out a rallying call, some would likely lend their aid, but others would sever their ties with Holfort. Once they did, there would in effect be enemy nations on their doorstep. That posed an obvious threat.

Roland yawned. "If we have to rely on that brat to get us out of this, we're already screwed. How about we just admit defeat and surrender?"

"If we were to do that, Rachel would surely execute us both. They have nursed disdain for us for a very long time."

"They're ancient, so that checks out. Our own ancestors hailed from Rachel! Hell, from what I hear, most of them were from lower-ranking nobility."

"You ought to be careful about saying such things aloud," Mylene admonished him.

Rachel and its allies were at last mounting a force to invade Holfort.

Amused, Roland muttered to himself, "Now the real question is what that brat will do."

"I want revenge on Roland."

Gathered inside my dorm room were the Als, my fiancées, and Erica, who I'd also asked to join us. We were meeting for the express purpose of discussing my desire to make Roland suffer for all he had done.

I had prepared tea and snacks for everyone, and they filled the air around the table with a fragrant aroma. Warm sunlight trickled through the window, making for a relaxing early afternoon atmosphere. It was frankly a waste to spend a day like this on a meeting with such a disturbing subject. I resented Roland all the more for putting me in this position.

Luxion and Cleare exchanged brief looks before turning back to me.

"I struggle with the notion that you are in your right mind, Master," said Luxion. "We have just learned that Rachel is moving to strike, and you're preoccupied with retaliating against your own king."

"Yeah. Though I guess our master does love wasting time on pointless things."

As Luxion said, word had just arrived that Rachel was preparing for war with Holfort. I'd figured they were on the move, but it turned out they had roped in most of our neighboring countries to join them.

Angie fixed me with an exasperated look when she learned why I'd gathered them. This talk of war had her anxious. She took a sip of her tea before frowning. "Judging by your reaction, I assume you've already devised some sort of plan to counter them?"

I reached for a snack on the table and picked it up between my fingers. It was a super thin cookie, which I brought to eye level so I could examine both its front and back. "That really depends on my opponent."

Noelle frowned, irritated with my attitude. She snatched the cookie away. "Give it some proper thought. We're all counting on you, you know?" She had

first-hand experience of war from her time in the Alzer Republic, so she had no patience for my antics.

My shoulders slumped. “I’ll take care of it one way or another. But more importantly, what I want right now is *revenge* on *Roland*! And I’d like you guys to come up with some ideas.”

There was a limit to how much I could devise on my own. I really wanted to stick it to Roland good and proper, which was why I had summoned my trusted partners and fiancées to back me up.

Livia let out a small sigh. “As we speak, His Majesty must be terribly busy at the palace. Why not give up this meaningless feud? We’re talking about our own king.”

Okay, so maybe Roland was supposed to be a figure of respect and reverence. Strictly in terms of status. But that didn’t change the fact that I thought of him as the most loathsome of swine—an *enemy*.

“I will *never* get over the grudge I bear him. He promoted me through the ranks of the nobility for no good reason whatsoever! Neither do I intend to forget how he shoved the care and feeding of the idiot brigade on my plate.”

Livia could find no words with which to push back against my unwavering resolve, so at last she just pursed her lips.

Erica watched on and sighed heavily. “Was it really necessary to call me all the way here simply to plot revenge on my father?”

Well, actually, part of it was that I’d wanted to invite Erica to my tea party, but I also figured there was good chance she could give me a solid lead on how to get under Roland’s skin. She was his daughter, after all.

“That jerk Roland seems to be awfully fond of you, Princess Erica. Don’t you have any dirt on him?”

Erica didn’t look the least bit pleased by this line of inquiry. “Even assuming I knew any such things, I wouldn’t share them with you. My lord, must you persist with these childish pranks?”

“Absolutely. I gotta.” I nodded to emphasize my refusal.

Luxion and Cleare moved in unison as if shaking their heads at me.

“If you’re so intent on this course, why not simply dispense with the childishness and assassinate Roland?” Luxion proposed. “That would dramatically reduce the amount of time you spend contemplating ways to avenge yourself. It would also remove a significant source of your anxiety. This seems like an efficient course of action to me.”

I gaped at him. “I don’t wanna do *that*. If Roland died, I’d only end up with even more crap on my plate. All I want is to see him suffer. That’s it.”

This time, it was Angie and Livia’s turn to glance at one another.

“Leon really does hate His Majesty, huh?” said Angie.

Livia smiled uneasily. “I suppose the one saving grace is that they aren’t after each other’s lives.”

Indeed. I had no desire to see Roland kick the bucket. I only desired his pain. Seeing his despair and suffering as I caused him endless grief brought me unspeakable joy.

Noelle popped the cookie she had stolen into her mouth, crunching down on it with more force than necessary. “I just don’t know why you’re so hung up on it right now, is the thing.”

I could see where she was coming from. We were now at the center of a whole international incident. The Holy Kingdom of Rachel was poised to launch a concerted war effort on our border. Now hardly seemed like the time for mischief, of all things. However...

“That’s precisely why it has to be now,” I protested. “If I strike in the middle of this mess, even if I go a little overboard, it’ll be easy to get away with it. The whole country’s counting on me.”

Yes, this was all calculated. At this moment, I could strike back at Roland hard and make off without any major consequences. Yet for some reason, everyone else seemed disgusted with my brilliance.

“If that’s what you’re after, just leave it to me!” Cleare offered eagerly. “I’ll show you what a real mind break looks like!”

Mind break? Like brain damage or something?

“Hold on just a sec. That sounds pretty disturbing. Even I’m put off,” I said.

“Oh, don’t get the wrong idea. It’s not like I really plan to *destroy* his *brain*.”

But considering how Cleare had changed Aaron into Erin, her attempts to reassure me weren’t exactly the most convincing. Then again, she did pique my interest. “Okay, so what would you do?”

Cleare eagerly dove into her diabolical plan. “Okay, so, first I’ll take a picture of you and Erica sleeping in bed together. Of course, there’ll be no real funny business involved. We’re just gonna make it *look* like something happened.”

All three of my fiancées’ faces went blank. It was so terrifying that I had to look in literally any other direction.

Erica pressed a hand to her forehead. “If you were to do something like that, the duke would be tried for a number of crimes.” She was already engaged, for one. Even implying I had messed around with Erica would land me in hot water—way hotter than I was prepared to hop into for the sake of mere revenge.

“No prob! I calculated the outcomes myself, and this lands *just* within the bounds of what you can get away with,” Cleare declared. “As long as Master drives Rachel away, the kingdom will have no choice but to ignore it. In fact, they’ll happily turn a blind eye!”

If Cleare was that confident, maybe it really was safe? I entertained the thought for a moment, but Angie interceded.

“Perhaps he’d get away with it, but at the same time, Her Majesty would take it as the perfect justification to insist Leon take responsibility and follow through by marrying the princess.”

I could actually imagine Miss Mylene saying that to me. It sent a chill down my spine. “Yeah, I’ll take a pass on responsibility,” I muttered.

Cleare started circling me in the air. “It will be *fine*. We’ll prepare a witness who can testify to your innocence—who can swear you didn’t actually lay a finger on her. Then you can tell Roland, ‘Your daughter sure was cute.’”

“You are completely inhumane,” I said.

“It’s all new humans—I can be as inhumane as I like,” Cleare reasoned. “Master, let’s stab Roland in the heart together!”

I slowly shook my head. Meanwhile, Angie, Livia, and Noelle left their seats to silently snatch Cleare out of the air.

Angie flashed the AI a dark smile. “I’ll admit, your plan would almost certainly leave a deep scar on His Majesty’s heart. However, it would be extremely inconvenient for the rest of us if rumors of this purported infidelity spread.”

“Cleary, I think we should have a little talk,” Livia said, beaming. “I’m especially eager to hear about what you did to Erin.”

Cleare tried desperately to wriggle free. If she unleashed her full power, it would have been easy for her. But she knew better than to harm any of my fiancées. “Girls, hold on!” she protested. “Please, I’m begging you, hear me out! I swear, this is a time-tested technique of ages past—nothing questionable about it. Nelly, don’t stand there grinning like that. Help!”

Noelle continued smirking as she threw up her hands and waved them. “Sorry, but you managed to piss me off too, so...”

As a last resort, Cleare’s eye moved to me. “Master, you understand me, don’t you?”

“Nope. I don’t get you at all.”

Yeah, I absolutely wanted Roland to suffer, but even I thought her methodology went overboard.

The girls dragged Cleare off, leaving the rest of us behind.

Luxion glanced between Erica and me. “Had you taken Cleare up on her proposal, Roland would have suffered immeasurable psychological damage. I suspect that would have led to further issues.”

I rubbed the back of my head, exasperated at my partner’s inability to grasp the full extent of the problem. “There’d be problems with more than just Roland. Anyway, I never imagined my fiancées would get that angry.”

“I must agree.”

We both tipped our heads—or in Luxion’s case, his body. As we tried to figure

out what could have so enraged the girls, Erica regarded us with a wry smile.

“Uncle, you really don’t understand?”

“Do you? Then enlighten me.”

I mean, I understood it wouldn’t be exactly pleasant for the girls to see a picture of me in bed with Erica. That made sense! But it was just a prank, right? I wouldn’t actually be doing anything. I could totally see them disagreeing, but it wasn’t worth getting so upset over. Yeah, okay, it was possible Miss Mylene might have pushed for my marriage with Erica as a result, and that’d be a pain. But that hypothetical was no reason to get so angry either.

Erica furrowed her brows for a long moment before threading her fingers together, holding them in front of her mouth so as to hide her expression—as if she was embarrassed. “It just goes to show how much they love you.”

“R-really?”

I found it adorable the way her cheeks tinged pink, but just as quickly, her expression sobered. “Besides, that plan wouldn’t only have harmed my father.”

“It wouldn’t?”

Erica sighed. “Consider their point of view: Even if it was all fake and just for revenge, such a photo would still suggest you had been unfaithful. You can see how that wouldn’t make them very happy, right? That it would, in fact, hurt them?”

I hadn’t thought that far.

“In essence, Cleare’s plan was a double-edged sword,” Luxion said.

Good thing I said no.

She had made herself clear, but rather than smiling, Erica’s expression clouded into one of anxiety. Her hands clasped against her chest, she implored, “Uncle, will everything with this war really be all right? I want to believe in you, I do. But I worry that even you will find things difficult this time around.”

True enough. As strong as Luxion was, with so many countries united against us, the kingdom couldn’t hope to escape entirely unscathed. The whole situation with Rachel posed a serious problem—but I couldn’t bear to worry my

sweet little niece.

Well, I keep calling her my niece, but we're not exactly blood relatives in this world.

"Nothing for you to worry about. Luxion and I will take care of everything." I lazily stretched my hand to prod Luxion with my finger. He took that as a good excuse to drift out of my reach.

"What you mean to say is I will take care of it, since I'm the one always doing everything. All you ever do is push the hard work onto me, Master," he complained.

As usual, he was a detestable twerp. "I only do it 'cause I trust you'll do a good job."

"While I may be an AI, I regret to inform you that even to my ears, those words ring hollow."

"Tsk, tsk. You sure are a cynic. Why not take my words at face value for once, huh? As it stands, you aren't even a little bit endearing."

"You may not lie, but neither do you trouble yourself to tell the truth. And you would have me take you at your word? Please, you must be joking."

"See, for once I compliment you, and this is how you repay me. And to think you're always whining about how I don't praise you enough." I turned to Erica. "Do you see what he's like?"

Luxion turned to her as well. "Erica, you must not believe a word this man says. He may be more psychologically aged than he appears, having retained memories from his previous life, but he is nonetheless a child who refuses to admit his own feelings. If ever you need anything, please come to me instead."

"Hey, what's the big idea?! That's my niece, and you're totally undermining me. She'll lose respect for her uncle!"

"You needn't worry. She shouldn't harbor any for you in the first place."

My hand shot out as I tried to grab hold of him, but before I could snatch that jerk out of the air, Erica began laughing. We froze and looked at her.

Her cheeks colored. "My apologies. You just looked to be having so much fun

bickering. I can tell that, for as much as you complain about one another, you truly are close.”

Luxion and I huffed and turned away.

“Who’d be close with that jerk?”

“We are merely master and servant. Nothing more.”

Erica watched us with a faint smile.

In any case, it looked like I was going to have to do something about Rachel—for the kingdom’s sake, sure, but also for my adorable niece.

Afterword

TRAPPED IN A DATING SIM: *The World of Otome Games is Tough for Mobs* has reached its tenth volume! We're finally out of the single digits! As the author, I'm thrilled that the series has continued so far. This couldn't have happened without all your support! Thank you so much. The story is headed to its finale soon. I hope you stick around to the very end.

This volume focused primarily on Angelica. That's largely true of the web novel as well, but I was aware that episodes involving her had been sorely lacking thus far. She's the heroine, yet she hardly gets any focus in the series! Ha, ha.

That was why I came up with a chance for Leon and Angelica to redefine their relationship. This volume is especially important for their romantic development, so for those of you who have decided to read the afterword before the story itself, I hope you enjoy!

The web novel finished with seven major acts, which added up to seven light novel volumes. I planned to keep it that way in the beginning, but I never really wrote any lovey-dovey Leon/Angie scenes in the web version. To be honest, I'm pretty bad at depicting romance to begin with, haha.

That said, I couldn't just skip the romance in the light novel version. It turned out to be a great learning experience for me. I read several romance light novels, and I have to admit, they were really entertaining. I can see why they're so popular.

I have avoided doing much romance because I was convinced I wasn't any good at it, but that was really a waste. I'd like to weave more romantic elements into my stories in the future, but...as it turns out, my second series is another big robot story. I feel like people think that's the only genre I write. But that's not true! I do love robots, but they're not my main interest! Sorry to all the real robot enthusiast authors out there (whoops).

Anyway, I plan to make my next series something more classic—no more

robot stuff. Just you wait, I'll write a normal fantasy with lots of heart, magic, and swordsmanship! That way people won't think of me as the author who always writes anti-heroes with terrible personalities.

I mean it, okay? I definitely will.

Anyway, I hope you'll continue to support me and this series!

